COWBOY-LIFE ROMANCES

Lariat

STORY MAGAZINE

NOV. 1941

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NOVELET by Will Brown

GUN-WITCH from WYOMING

Outlhooters hit for hideout when fire-haired Kerry Arnold's hex-guns spoke.

A FULL-LENGTH NOVEL by LES SAVAGE Jr.

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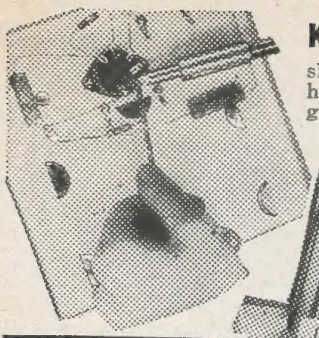

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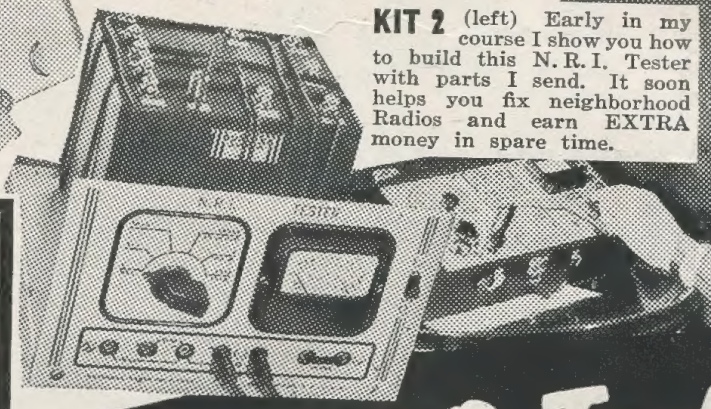

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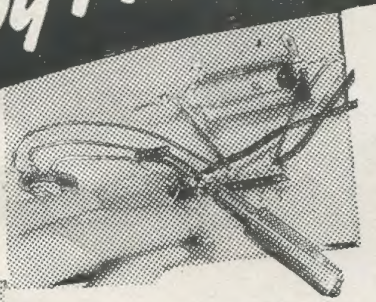

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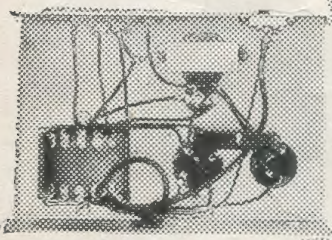

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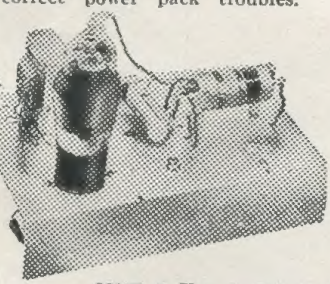

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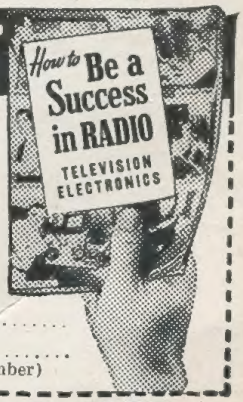

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GUN-WITCH FROM WYOMING . . . . . **Les Savage, Jr.** **76**
The lush grazeland of the Big Horns was ripe for pickin', and Hogarth was set to make his play . . . 'til a fire-haired girl's hex-gun spoke a hooter warning. *Kerry Arnold plays second-gun to no one on wild Wyoming range.*

Two Rangeland Novelets

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The gun-guard's proud head rode so high he failed to see the road-trap.

TWO PICTURE PAGES . . . . . **Walter Galli** **26, 115**
Belle Starr, bandit queen . . . and the Lincoln County cattle war.

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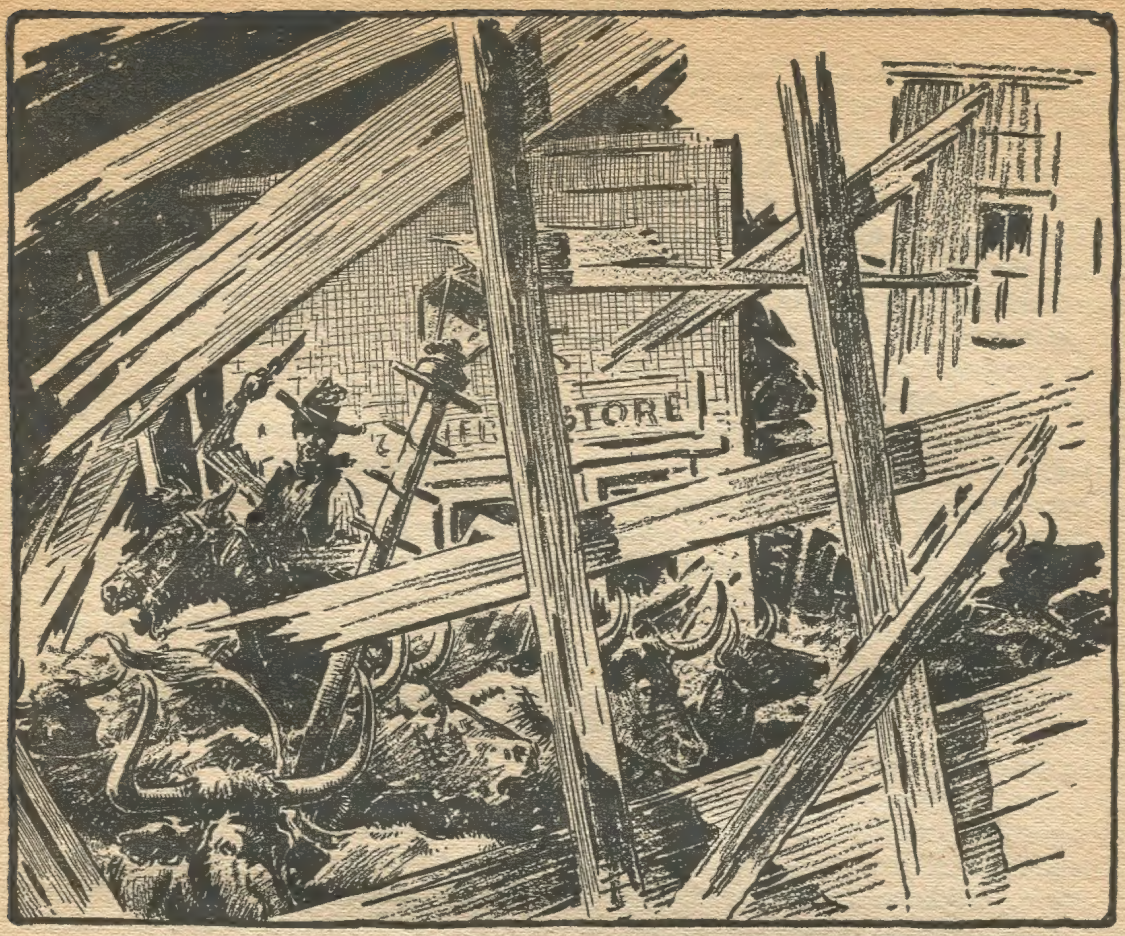
The angry herd formed a whirlpool movement of gigantic force. Lumber began to crack.



Stampede 'Em At Red River!

By Will C. Brown

It was building up to a hot-lead showdown. Then Jim Irish barked the challenge: "You've broke your last cowman, brother skunk. Call out your trigger handies. Get your fat belly ready to eat five thousand head of wild longhorns."

NEWCOMERS to the Cherokee Crossing country may have assumed at first glance that Nature was responsible for the Red River. If they lingered long enough to loosen trail-parched throats at any Cherokee bar, however, and gave an ear to the undercurrent of brass rail palaver, they soon would begin to get the impression, like everybody else, that a man named Spade Bonfils had personally dug the ugly stream—that he not only had dug the river himself, but also owned and operated it.

Young Jim Irish cut his midnight mustang out of the trail remuda on this afternoon, spoke briefly to Pete Tolbert, his second in command, and rode alone into Cherokee Crossing. He tied up at the first empty hitch place and accosted a passerby.

"Where does a man name of Spade Bonfils hang his hat?"

The other squirted tobacco juice toward the sandy red street, watching Irish's impatient, unsmiling eyes.

"Stranger, hey? Trail man?" He was a bearded old nester, dried up like the country and wrinkled as a buffalo chip.

"If I wasn't I'd know where Bonfils squats," Irish said flatly.

The bearded man's eyes narrowed a fraction on the brush-scratched Texas holster and the weathered .45 butt. Then he prepared to move off with the plank-walk flow. "Might try the Red Saloon," he drawled over his stooped shoulder. The rest came in a low mumble: "And it ain't

gonna do you no good, Mister Trail Boss. You'll pay—like everybody else!"

Irish caught the muttered words. His mouth tightened in a humorless grin.

He stepped purposefully up to the walk. The throbbing trail town, he observed, was not like the old days, before he had gone away from Texas to fight in the futile conflict on the side of the South. The Red River crossing town had been no bigger than a saddle blanket then, and a man could swim his herd where he damned well pleased.

Now, he saw, it was a hard, sullen, melting pot of a town, with a ready chip on its dirty shoulder. As he walked along, watching for the Red Saloon, Jim Irish took in the place and the people.

It was a sharp little town, he observed —a churning of sharp characters, sharp laughter and sharp whiskey, with ribald saloon music and the mixed noises of bootheels, shod mustangs, Indian ponies and rattling supply wagons. The faces he saw reflected trail riders, cowmen, nesters on the move, bad men on the prod, ragged buffalo hunters, and sundry war backwash. Beyond the red dust ribbon of the long and narrow main street there was the ever-present mutter of the river itself—now flooded. And somewhere, as a backdrop tempo to all that, there was the incessant, rumbling undertone of bawling cattle, already night-herded in the flats to the south and waiting for the river fording, outbound from Texas on the northward drive. And always, dominating the whole raw picture, like a gigantic tarantula in a well-constructed web, was the invisible hand of the man he hunted—Spade Bonfils.

THE Red Saloon was big and ornate. It was jammed like a dead-end cattle chute. His wide-shouldered, trail-roughed figure towered through to the first barkeep.

"Where's Spade Bonfils?" Irish spoke shortly. Men within earshot stayed their whiskey arms a moment to cast a glance at him. The pugnosed rye slosher did not look aside from pouring drinks. "In his office, maybe. Stairway at the back."

On the second floor Irish sighted a sharp-faced, under-size man in the room where the broad stairs emerged. The man lazed at a table, shuffling through some papers. A loose cigarette drooped from a corner of his thin lips. He wore tailored clothes and a black shoestring tie. A fuzzy black hat was pushed up on his high forehead.

"I'm looking for Spade Bonfils," said Irish.

The man at the table squirted cigarette smoke toward the voice without turning, and continued leafing through official-looking papers.

"What you want with 'im?"

Irish stalked around the table. The ire and the fight that had been building up inside him all along the weary trail flamed to the surface. He reached out a long left arm and fastened a big hand securely into the thin man's coat and shirt collar. With a mighty jerk he hoisted the man up from the chair. The thin one turned a snarling, sharp-toothed face and struggled to free himself.

"I said I was looking for Spade Bonfils. I said it civil. What I want with him is my business. Talk."

The small man struggled back from the table. Irish's eyes dropped to the papers that had spilled. They said: "Government Land Office."

"You must be Linder." Irish stared down in surprise at the man who was now straightening his coat.

The other's eyes narrowed apprehensively. "Yeah." He took the cigarette out of his mouth with nervous fingers. "And you must be Jim Irish."

"Right. The cattlemen send you word I was coming with a herd?"

The other nodded. "They sent word you were moving a combined herd of South Texas longhorns numbering five thousand —headed north to hit the Chisholm." He looked over Irish's shoulder. "Said you didn't propose to pay Bonfils for crossing the Red River over his property. And that they wanted me to help you."

Irish felt a surge of bitter hopelessness as he stared down at Linder. He could see there would be no use to expect cooperation from this man. Not from a shifty-looking land agent who even made his office here in Bonfils' saloon building. No wonder, he thought angrily, that Bonfils had things roped, hog-tied and branded at Cherokee Crossing—if this was all the federal government provided in the way of a land title official.

Linder may have read the distaste that came to the trail man's face. He shrugged slightly and backed away.

"What we want to know," Irish spoke sharply, "is how did Bonfils show up with title to the river shoreline at the only safe crossing point between here and Buffalo Flat? And how does he get away with collecting tribute for every head of cattle that moves out of Texas through Cherokee Crossing? Is that title of his legal? Or is it a fake? That's what the cowmen wanted you to investigate, Linder. And they're paying me to help get at the bottom of it. I reckon you know this man Bonfils is breaking every range man that sends his stuff through here to hit the Chisholm route to market?

Linder averted his eyes. His voice was half whine, and Irish thought of a mongrel wagon dog.

"It's legal," Linder protested. "Ain't no use to contest it, Irish. I been telling trail bosses this for months. Ain't no use to struggle. He owns the whole fording strip, and he can charge for passage if he wants to. His papers are in good order."

"Papers!" Irish snapped. "Where in hell did he get the papers? Who issued them? How does a land title like that get into existence? Cherokee Crossing used to be free range in the old days."

Linder squirmed. "I issued the papers myself. I'm the official government land agent and I can issue first deed to claimants on river shoreline or anywhere else where a title is not already claimed. You cattlemen ought to know that—it's the way all land out here's been titled."

Irish drilled the uneasy little man with a murderous gaze.

"You issued a title," he breathed coldly, "knowing all the time it's the only place for a hundred miles free of quicksand and with shallow fording?"

At that moment, a hoarse, careless voice sounded in the doorway.

"What's all the stampedin' out here? Another trail boss come in for bellyaching?"

Irish stared at the man in the doorway, a giant of a figure, with buzzard-black hair and features like a bull buffalo. He was slouched against the door edge, his fingers stuck lazily in his belt. Then he slowly stiffened. The thick lines of his jaw began to harden. The mockery went out of his eyes. The red veins of his face stood out.

Irish was the first to speak. "So it's you, Sam! So you're Spade Bonfils! Didn't expect this—thought you skipped to California when Texas seceded."

"What you thought," grunted the other, "is not now and never was of any interest to me. Linder," he added, the mocking tone coming back, "meet my long-lost stepbrother, Jim Irish."

Irish did not look at the land agent. He kept hostile eyes on the grizzly in the doorway.

"All right, Sam—or Spade Bonfils, or whatever name you go by now—what's the game this time?"

"You know what it is, Jim. You didn't eat that longhorn dust all the way up from Santone for nothing."

"How did you ever get the brains to rook the government into turning that shoreline title over to you? Little payoff to your coyote friend here? What's it going to cost me to ford five thousand head over your private river crossing? And the Stromberg outfit's already here with five thousand more, waiting for the river to run down, and there's as many more in a herd a couple of days behind me."

Bonfils carefully inserted a cheroot into his wide mouth. He kept reddish, mocking eyes on the young trail boss.

"For most people," he grunted, "fifty cents a head. For kinfolks, like you—I make a special rate. Sixty cents."

Irish looked with frank hatred at the big man who lounged there, the grown-up face now of one who had bullied him, hazed him, for those short years when they had been thrown together as kids. The old dislike and contempt of childhood came back, but there was no fear, now, as there had been then. His step-brother of years ago, long unseen—now kingpin of the Red River! Ruler of a cutthroat gang ready to make it bloody rough for any herd, any trail crew, who might attempt to cross the treacherous Red without first crossing Bonfils' thick palm.

Irish studied the man, feeling new hopelessness that he could succeed in his assignment from the group of cowmen he represented. He thought of earlier years, gratified again that there was no real blood relation between him and this man. Sam's

father, with Sam in tow from another marriage, had come along and married Jim Irish's widowed mother when both boys were small. That union had been short-lived. Sam's father and Sam had moved. Only occasionally had Irish heard of Sam as the years wore along—none of the reports good.

"You missed out on some easy pickings by going away to the war," said Bonfils with the old mockery. "Good prospectin' on the frontier while that was going on—and now, too, Jim. For a smart man."

"Smart man—or fat rattlesnake, Sam? The cowmen are trying to make a comeback, straining every gut to squeeze even a dollar a head profit at Abilene after three months on the trail. And you squat here with your pack of blood-letters and throw your spurs into 'em for half their profits—before they get started good!"

"You don't have to cross here. There's Buffalo Flat."

"Hundred miles out of the way—and quicksand that goes to China."

Bonfils straightened up.

"Well, you ready to do business? Or you want to be convinced? You always was a stubborn-jawed hombre. I think I'm going to enjoy teachin' you a little lesson, Jim."

Irish walked to the stairway. He turned back. His trail-grimed mouth had a tight grin. "Teach me, Mister Spade Bonfils. I'm not paying. You've bribed Linder. The title to that shoreline's not legal. I'm crossing my stuff free or I'll know the reason. You've broke your last cowman, brother skunk! Call out your trigger handies! The cattlemen can't stand the squeeze any longer. Get your fat belly ready to eat five thousand head of longhorns!"

Irish turned for the stairs. Spade Bonfils, his mocking grin a murderous snarl now, jerked a significant nod to Linder. Irish paused at the bar, upped two, quick stiff ones. He pushed through the curious-eyed crowd. He bought small supplies at a store, then made his way to his prairie-quick midnight colored mustang. He took the river route out of town, heading back south to where Pete Tolbert and the trail hands held the big herd of five thousand wild range cattle, mostly longhorn steers. Those cattle might never see the Abilene stock pens, Irish thought dejectedly. Cherokee Crossing was turning out to be an awfully big cud for a trail-weary cowpoke to have to chew.

II

THE UGLY waters of Red River licked at the boots of a man who lay sprawled on the sandy shore.

The water was spilling into his boots now, and rushing across his knees. In the depths of the blackness that shrouded his brain he felt the first conscious touch of the hungry river. Somewhere in his memory came the misty recollection of the loud, stunning sound of the sixgun. It had exploded somewhere behind him. Fire-like pain had stabbed into all his bones. Then blackness.

That is how Jim Irish existed in that critical quarter hour, floating midway between life and death, between the sand and the creeping river.

He moaned and stirred slowly, clawing at the sand with his fingers, as if he still tried to wrestle the Colt from his hip, to tear it out and whirl about in the saddle and return the fire of his assailant. The river inched toward his waistline. Irish clawed at the sand once more, trying to drag his body forward, away from the water.

Pain blasted his head, but he squirmed upward again. A little at a time, with gasping breath, he crawled and twisted away from the river.

Somewhere, just outside the overhanging sandstone shelf where he had dragged himself, he heard after a while the sound of a walking man. He tried to call out, but his throat felt like a parched mesquite bean. A man was squatting beside him in another moment. Quick fingers pulled Irish's gun free and tossed it over into the sand.

"Who are you, Linder?" Irish managed to say.

"Yeah. My aim ain't what it ought to be." The unseen man spoke laconically. "When you fell off your horse your head hit a rock. I guess I just creased your neck with that bullet. Thought for a while the river would do the rest."

Irish mumbled, "What's the next move, Linder?"

"Got to finish the job, Irish. Hate to do it this way. Messy. But Bonfils don't like

to be contested. You ought to have stayed out of this."

Irish tried to get his numb brain to working. Awareness of danger helped to beat back the fog. In his young lifetime of trailing cattle, of skirmishing against outlaw and Indian, from the Rio to Abilene, he had been in many a tight predicament, met many a hard customer. When the group of cattlemen, facing financial ruin, had picked him to take a big herd northward, and to dig into the facts about Spade Bonfils' crossing rights, they thought they had picked the ablest, fightin'est young rangeman in Texas. They had made a mistake. He was angered at the thought of being bushwhacked the very first night on the river, and the anger helped clear his mind.

"What's the pay-off, Linder, before I go? Bonfils bribe you for that shoreline deed? And order you to kill me?"

"Around here a man does what Bonfils says. I might tell you I don't like this, Irish, but I got no choice."

Linder was drawing his own gun. Irish could hear it when it cleared leather. Linder would have to get down close, to fire a bullet into his head in the dark. Irish could tell when Linder bent over him.

The black pain lifted in his desperation to get at this man. He went at Linder with long arms flailing, threshing out wildly in the dark. Linder grunted in surprise. Irish grappled for Linder's gun arm, and the .45 roared, the bullet blasting up sand. The two of them strained and struggled in desperate silence. Then the gun wrist snapped. The small man moaned loudly. Irish drew up a boot and kicked wildly. Linder shot back across the dark sand to strike the low side of the ledge.

"Don't try to get up," Irish gritted. "I got your gun and I'm emptying it if you make a move."

He could hear Linder's hard breathing. The land agent cursed viciously, then mumbled. "All right—what are you going to do now?"

The man with the gun crouched in the darkness, finger coiled in readiness on the trigger. Hot waves of anger flooded over him.

The situation had now completely unfolded. Linder had sold out to Bonfils. The government man had thrown in with the whole scheme, had issued the land title to Bonfils, was so deeply involved that Bonfils could order him out to stage an ambush murder.

Irish knew that in the rampant, complex period of Reconstruction, with the South in turmoil, the setting had been ripe for such a manipulation. Higher-up federal officials were far away, and no doubt deliberately indifferent to what went on out there on the Red River frontier. They would pay scant attention to a dispute far out on the edge of the Indian Territory, involving no more than a meager mile of river shore wasteland.

It would mean little to office dignitaries back East that this strip was a vital gateway for the prairie herds moving north from the Texas ranges.

Irish's head throbbed with pain, and with the futility of trying to beat Bonfils' pat hand at Cherokee Crossing.

Somewhere down the river, above the noise of the current, Irish heard a voice, and then the sounds of a horse. The voice called out again and he knew it for a woman's voice.

"Johnny! Johnny-y-y!"

"Your name Johnny?" Irish asked the man in the dark.

"Yeah." Linder spoke briefly. "That's my sister. Looking for me. We got a house back from the river a way."

IRISH kept the gun trained toward the form in front of him. He was feeling in his bones that he could not shoot the man who had tried to murder him. Not in the dark. Not like this. It was too much like shooting a man in the back.

"She doesn't know," Linder was speaking with a strain. "If you don't mind, would you keep it from her that—that I'm mixed up in this?"

The horse was approaching. A woman's voice called out again.

"Walk out to her," Irish ordered. He kept his voice low. "Talk fast, mister. Make up something. Remember I got this gun on you."

He followed Linder from under the ledge. The stars strained in an overcast sky, and there was light enough for him to see the thin little man who scrambled out ahead of him. And he saw, too, the outlines of the young woman who sat a sleek

dark mount and peered anxiously at the two men.

"Had to talk over a little business with a man, Sis," Linder spoke. "Sorry if you got worried."

"I saw your horse and another, tied up there on the ridge above us," the girl replied. "I was afraid something had happened, Johnny, when you didn't show up. Supper's waiting." She hesitated. "Maybe your friend would like to come to supper with you—it's a long ride into town."

Irish still had his hand on the butt of the gun he had holstered. The girl's voice had a musical appeal to his ear, strangely pleasing. Without knowing exactly why, he answered, "That's mighty nice, I'd be glad to."

Linder shrugged and walked off to get the horses.

Jim Irish's own mount had been caught and tied up near Linder's horse, after the land agent's bullet had toppled Irish to the ground.

The girl led the way up a ravine, working to the ridge above, and took a prairie trail. A mile later they were at a small frame ranch house where lamp light welcomed from the windows.

Linder took the three horses to the corral. Irish followed Mary Linder into the house.

In the light she looked curiously at him, and stiffled an exclamation.

"I know I look like the wrath of the devil," Irish managed to grin. Blood was crusted across his neck, and there was a gash on his head. Wet sand stuck to him. He still wore Linder's gun in his holster. But somehow, his fear of Linder as a killer had vanished in the presence of the blue-eyed girl and the soft hands that worked at his wounds. Linder came in, clutching his wrist. He waited patiently until Mary had finished with Irish, then motioned to his own injury. She made no comment.

When Mary went to the kitchen, Linder produced a bottle of rye and poured out two heavy slugs. Irish was glad to sink his taster into the raw, biting stimulant.

"You're supposed to be dead and floating down the river," Linder mumbled, staring at his glass. "And here you sit in my house, waiting to eat my food. They'll kill me for this, Irish. And you'll die too."

"Bonfils won't put up with failure, huh?"

Linder nodded. "My job was to get you out of the picture. I didn't like the job, Irish. I can tell you that much." He shrugged his thin shoulders. "But there was no choice."

Mary Linder was at the door, announcing that the meal was ready. They ate in strained silence. The girl tried to carry the conversation, but trouble hung over the scene like damp smoke. Later, she showed Irish to the spare room. He closed the door, securing it with a chair tilted under the knob, and went to sleep with the Colt under his pillow. When he awoke at daylight he sniffed the fragrance of coffee and frying ham from the kitchen.

Linder called and Irish opened the door. "I rode down and got your gun, and cleaned it," Linder spoke. He handed it over. "Mind giving me mine?"

"Help yourself. It's under the pillow."

Linder sat on the edge of the bed. Irish watched him narrowly, thinking he saw that the little agent had something on his mind that he wanted to get off.

"You know the story now, Linder, from the cattlemen's standpoint," Irish said quietly. "We don't figure any one man has got right on his side when he tries to block that river. You want to stand by and get hurt later—or you want to get on the right side and help wind it up now?"

Linder stared at the floor a long time. He shrugged, and there was a note of helplessness in his tone. "I got roped into this. I got in trouble once, back East—bad trouble. Bonfils knows it. He's got pull back there. He wangled this job for me. Yes—I fixed the papers that vacated the land, then made new deeds for Bonfils. He's got legal title, and the government behind him. I don't know what you or anybody else can do about it."

Irish moved about the room stiffly, still sore from his wound.

"We're going to fight it out," the trail man replied. "It's either that or the end of the cattle business down here. The war's not over yet on the Red River, Linder."

"Don't forget Bonfils has gunmen all over the place," Linder warned. "Army evaders and stragglers and professional killers. They can wipe out any herd and any cow crew that tries to cross without

paying. And the government deed is in his favor."

"My people're not exactly yearlings," Irish returned wryly. "We knew we weren't ridin' up here to a square dance."

Mary Linder was at the door. She inquired briefly about the injuries of both men and told them breakfast was waiting. Her eyes met Irish's and he sensed both understanding and appeal in her direct gaze. When she moved back to the kitchen, Irish turned to the land agent.

"You're supposed to report to Bonfils today? Why don't you lay low instead? He'll think my body went floating down the river. That'll give me and you both a break."

"All right. I reckon I owe you something for what nearly happened. If the showdown comes, I just want you to protect Mary and me."

IRISH watched from a kitchen window as Johnny Linder rode away.

"Johnny's in serious trouble, isn't he?" Mary asked. "Is there anything you can do to help him? I've tried so hard—I came west with him, I've tried to look after him. But somewhere in the past he went wrong — don't know what to do!"

Irish surveyed the pretty girl. A ne'er-do-well brother can make a lot of grief, he thought, for a sister that loves him.

"We bought this little place when he got the government land job," Mary was saying. "But he's mixed up somehow in that Bonfils crowd, Jim. They're dangerous men. That man Cleft, the one acting as town marshal in Cherokee—he was a federal convict in the East before Bonfils brought him out here. And Cleft is after me—and I loathe him. Johnny hates him too, but he can't do anything about it. It—it's hell out here, Jim." Tears were in her eyes.

Jim Irish reached out a hand in a gesture of sympathy. Then, there came from the front pasture the sound of loping horses. Two riders were dismounting in front of the house.

Jim Irish was a trail man. He knew the rugged Texas frontier, he knew cattle, and he knew men. Women were a blank page in his book of tumultuous experience. The sight of fear in Mary's eyes and the paleness that came to her face started a deep, inner anger stirring again inside him against the thing or the men, whatever it was, that kept fright so close to the surface in this girl.

"It's Cleft!" she whispered from the window. "Cleft and a man named Ferd. They're Bonfils men, and they've come to see Johnny! Please hide, Jim! Stay out of sight until I get rid of them. I'm afraid for you!"

A heavy knock sounded at the door. Mary motioned to the closet at the end of the room. Irish stepped inside its cramped space, leaving the door open a bare half inch.

Cleft was a square, squat, bear-shaped man of rugged face and close-set black eyes. An older man followed behind the marshal.

"Are you looking for Johnny?" Mary tried to speak casually. "He's just ridden off for town, Cleft. You must have missed him."

'We came the river trail." Cleft eyed the girl. His voice was an arrogant rumble. "Bonfils wanted to see him."

'I think he was planning to see Bonfils in town," Mary replied. 'Sorry you had the ride for nothing." She moved a step toward the door, as if dismissing the pair.

Cleft stood his tracks. He turned his shaggy head this way and that, taking in the place with beady eyes.

"Coffee smells good, Mary." Cleft tried to make his raw voice jovial. "Ferd and me sure could do with a cup. We hit the trail before sunup."

He pushed past the girl, reaching to pat her shoulder with a familiarity that made her cringe.

Cleft was looking into the kitchen. Ferd, the older man, slouched inside the front door.

"Have company for breakfast, Mary?" Cleft turned his shaggy head and eyed her intently.

"No—that is, what do you mean?" Mary faltered.

Cleft jerked his head toward the table in the kitchen.

"Three coffee cups, three dirty plates."

Mary stood helplessly as Cleft lumbered across the room and jerked open the door of the spare bedroom. He looked into the room, then turned back.

"Who stayed here last night?"

"I don't know that it's any of your business, Cleft," Mary retorted. "Now I've got work to do—you two had better be moving along. Johnny isn't here—you'll find him in town. Good morning."

"Not so fast," Cleft grunted. "Outside, Ferd," Cleft ordered, jerking his head without looking at his assistant. "I'll be out in a minute." Ferd eased out the door. His boots sounded across the narrow porch.

Cleft stood close to Mary.

"You're using a lot of uppity ways, young lady. I tried to be nice to you. I think anybody in the spot you and Johnny are in would have sense enough to know who to treat nice. Why don't you thaw out a little—you know I'm crazy about you, and Ed Cleft don't like to ride down no box canyon."

He thrust an arm out suddenly, his eyes burning.

He grasped Mary's arm. He pulled her roughly to him, and his bear-like arm circled her waist.

Irish exploded out of the closet.

He grasped Cleft by the thick shoulder. When Cleft's head flew around with a grunt of surprise, Irish swung upward. His hard fist smacked painfully true under Cleft's oak-like chin. The big man rocked stupidly in his boots.

Irish swung again, and Cleft's two steel-trap hands caught at the flying fist, then the two men closed. Irish realized that he had taken on his match.

Irish freed his trapped hand by bringing a hard knee up to Cleft's ample stomach, but the marshal's great paws groped for the young man's throat. Irish swung viciously for Cleft's eyes, raining double blows at the little sockets, working to close those eyes, trying desperately to evade the big hands groping for his windpipe. It was too fast, too desperate, and too close, to go for guns. Yet Cleft was trying now to get a hand back to his hip while he clawed with the other at Irish's throat. The big man suddenly stumbled backward and the gun came out and levelled. Irish sprang aside with a catlike leap, and the bullet roared into the wall across the room.

Then Mary Linder was throwing herself across Cleft's gun arm, dragging it floorward, and the next bullet plowed into the carpet. The man Ferd was scurrying across the porch to the door, and when he careened inside, gun out, Irish already was throwing a shot.

Ferd buckled and went down, drilled squarely through the head, and Irish was raining gun barrel blows on Cleft's skull.

The big man was cursing and staggering. He threw Mary aside with a mighty swing of his gun arm and sought to turn the Colt inward toward Irish. The cowman was afraid to fire with Mary in range. He made a terrific sweep with his gun at Cleft's big hand, and the marshal's six-gun clattered to the floor.

Irish slapped his heavy Colt viciously, unmercifully, back and forth across Cleft's face, and under the murderous pistol whipping the big man began to sob anguished curses, began to sag, trying to bury his face in hands, his head streaming blood, his eyes red and closing.

He descended to the floor, falling clumsily like an undermined boulder in a slow rockslide.

Irish stood back. With a powerful effort, Cleft assembled himself on all fours. He started crawling toward the door, with Irish towering over him, gun hanging in his hand. Like a crippled animal, the big groaning hulk, half-blinded with blood in his eyes, crawled over the body of the dead man.

Mary turned her eyes away, looking at the grim face of young Jim Irish. Irish stood there, feet wide apart, gun loose in his hand, watching Cleft drag himself from the house.

He followed the beaten man to the doorway, saw Cleft in the yard, saw him struggle to get on his horse. He slumped in the saddle, riding slowly away toward Cherokee.

"I'm glad," Mary whispered when Irish turned back. She reached out an impulsive hand. "I'm glad you didn't kill him in cold blood."

"I'll only have it to do later," he replied. "He'll head for Bonfils. Then the whole mob of those lead-slingers and gun-lawyers will be down on my herd and my men.

"You'd better get out of sight, too, and hide out for a while with Johnny," Irish warned. "This thing is coming to a showdown now, Mary. I don't want you to get hurt!"

III

BY MID-AFTERNOON he was on his way back to the flat holding grounds where his trail crew worked to keep the cattle bunched and quiet. The ever-present danger of stampede kept the riders grimly busy.

Four men were standing at the chuck wagon, watching his approach. Irish recognized the tall figure of Mike Stromberg, whose herd was ahead of Irish's, nearer the river. Pete Tolbert, Irish's grizzled old foreman, leaned against a wagon wheel. Two of Irish's cowhands stood near the camp fire.

Even as he dismounted, Irish sensed trouble.

"Howdy, Stromberg," Irish spoke.

"I'm a straight-talkin' man, Irish," Stromberg rumbled, ignoring Irish's extended hand. "The cattlemen sent me word to hold my herd and not to deal with Bonfils till you showed up and tried to get at the bottom of this thing. They didn't tell me you and Bonfils was kinfolks!"

Irish cut his glance to Tolbert, then to his two riders. They looked dejectedly away.

"So that's it!"

Pete Tolbert spoke up, eyeing his boss levelly. "They're tellin' it around that you and Bonfils are brothers, Jim. That maybe you ain't too pert about forcing a showdown on the crossing payoff."

"A man can't choose his own stepbrother," Irish replied. He met Stromberg's suspicious gaze.

"The word's trickled out to my men from town," Stromberg frowned. "They're afraid of a trap, Irish. I'm a-tellin' it to you blunt. They know what's happened to trail crews before when somebody tried to buck Bonfils."

Stromberg swung on his horse.

"Hold on a minute!" Irish called out. He moved a step nearer to the mounted man. "You backing out—or not? Give me plain English, Stromberg!"

The tall man said wearily, "Count me out. I'll pay and cross. I want to get on up the trail."

Irish whirled to his men. "You backing out, too, Pete? What do the men say?"

Pete shuffled his boot toe without answering.

Slim, a rider spoke up. "Cattle's gettin' mighty fidgety, Jim. Maybe we ought to pay off and follow behind Mr. Stromberg here. Maybe the rest of the job is too big for us to handle." Andy, the other rider, nodded agreement.

Irish read the doubt in their minds. Bonfils had spread the word, linking him up with the whole Cherokee business, getting him branded as a double-crosser, even among his own men.

The sound of beating hoofbeats came to the tense little group. A cloud of red dust erupted two hard-faced, gun-heavy riders.

"Pull them horses down—you want to stampede my herd?" Irish yelled. He jerked his head toward the distant cattle. "They're nervous enough now and hell to hold—without you town owls lopin' up here making more noise than a thunderstorm!"

The thick, heavy-set man sat his horse and glared down at Irish. "You in charge here?" he demanded. "I'm from Bonfils. If you want to cross the river you can follow late tomorrow behind Stromberg's stuff. Stromberg can make his crossing by daylight."

"I'm Stromberg," the tall cowman spoke up, eyeing the pair. "And I'm ready to pay off and cross."

"Any time," the other showed a crooked grin. "River's run down enough now. Both of you come in to see Bonfils early tomorrow. Have the cash or be ready to cut out the equivalent in cattle for payment. If you're Irish," he added, looking significantly at Jim, "Bonfils especially wants to see you. So does Cleft." He grinned without humor. The two riders pulled away and headed back toward Cherokee.

"So Bonfils especially wants to see you!" Stromberg snarled.

"Not for the reason you think, Stromberg! Listen—I want to by-pass your herd tonight and ford first. You willing to take a gamble on me? By the way I cross then, you can make up your mind whether you're with me or on your own! Fair enough?"

"Go ahead!" Stromberg retorted. "I want to see how you do it!"

"Wait a minute!" Pete Tolbert spoke up. "You're in charge here, Jim—but the men ain't gonna be too keen on a night

fording, especially if they think you're in cahoots with Bonfils."

"I'll take a chance on that!"

Stromberg rode away. Irish turned to his men. "All right, Pete. Get the men ready. I'm going into town to make arrangements. We'll start the herd moving just before midnight."

The riders reluctantly moved for their horses. Irish rode into Cherokee Crossing but he did not head for the Red Saloon. Keeping an alert watch against surprises, he made a thorough study of the narrow, shack-lined main street. He followed it down to the river. He came back, noting every post, porch and doorway of the business houses. On foot, he wandered along the plank sidewalks, measuring with his eyes the width of the street, calculating the strength of the false-front frame buildings.

He turned back for his horse. When he reached the hitch rack, he sighted two men lounging in front of the store where his horse was tied. The two appeared not to see him, but Irish spotted the twin Colts hanging on their hips, noticed the unmistakable readiness of their pretended slouch. Out of the tail of his eye he saw two others across the narrow street.

"Four in all," he whispered to himself. "Experts, too, from the looks of 'em!"

The man nearest him suddenly moved out to block his way. He was pale, narrow-eyed. His long fingers were taut at his side.

"Bonfils would like to see you, mister," he said tonelessly. "So would Cleft. Right away. Keep your hands away from your gun and move on ahead of us."

Irish measured the positions of the two men across the street without turning his head. For the moment, they couldn't fire from over there without endangering the pair of toughs on this side.

He appeared to give in, shrugging slightly, keeping his hands out. He needed one more step.

He took it easy, beginning to say something to the hired killer. He swung his right fist with his shoulder coming down behind it, driving it like a piston into the pale gunman's stomach, and careening on in the same drive to the secod man. In his forward lunge he crashed into the other gunman, driving him hard into the store wall, and then Irish came up with his right hand, .45 in it. He fired twice. The two men sagged almost together and went down in a heap.

Irish was loosening his reins. He leaped into the saddle and bent low, swinging his horse out into the street before the first bullets came across. He turned his horse abruptly alongside a big, lumbering supply wagon that was clanking down the street. Using the wagon as cover, he rode close in to it. The wagon driver was swearing and fighting the reins of his frightened, four-mule team. Bullets from across the street sang overhead. At the mouth of the first narrow alley, Irish swung quickly away from the wagon, into the cover of the alley, and put spurs to his horse. In another minute he was in the edge of the town, heading for camp.

IRISH and Pete Tolbert were riding drag on the vast, uneasy herd under a leaden sky at midnight. His whole force of riders was on duty, strung out on the flanks, grimly aware of the tension and rumors and distrust that had settled over their ranks. Far to the rear the cook was bringing up the wagon.

"You didn't actually think I'd thrown in with Bonfils, did you Pete?" Irish asked the old man.

His foreman grunted in the dark. "That's just what Stromberg thought. The rest of us are sorta undecided, Jim. But I'll give it to you straight—you bit off a job you can't handle. The cattlemen are done for. We'll have to leave the big chunk of our profits right here at Cherokee Crossing. Bonfils' got a federal title, and they ain't no way I can see of whippin' that."

"Just his strip of land along the crossing frontage," Irish said. "That's all he's got, Pete."

"Well," Pete retorted, "how else can you get to the danged river without crossing it? These here steers ain't got no wings to fly with!"

"Cherokee Crossing's a town, Pete," the younger man returned. "Main street of it is open to the public. Bonfils owns about all the buildings on it. But he don't own the street."

"Helldorado!" Pete snorted. "You can't take five thousand crazy-wild longhorns

down that narrow main street, son. Wouldn't be nothin' left of it if you tried."

"What I've been thinking about," Irish said, grinning in the dark. "It's Bonfils' town, Pete. Who cares if nothing's left of it?"

Pete abruptly pulled up his horse and stared hard across at Irish in the dark.

"Goodgawdamighty! You ain't meanin' —!"

"Just what I am meaning, Pete!" Irish chuckled harshly. "It's now or never. Bonfils has got the whole cow business of Texas out on a limb. We might as well get it broken off now as to die by degrees, Pete. Cherokee Crossing is his town. Pete —by daylight there ain't going to be any more of Cherokee Crossing! At least not much!"

The older man continued to stare, breathing heavily and working his tobacco round and round in his jaw.

Irish went on: "We're going down main street with this herd, Pete. We're going to swap lead with anybody that tries to stop us! That's why I'm by-passing Stromberg. But I'm sending a man over to try to get him to follow right behind us. That town can't stand ten thousand crazy longhorns. It'll have to give. They'll bust that main street wide open!"

"They'll try to kill every animal we got, and us too!" Pete objected.

"We're not going through peaceful," Irish said softly. "We're stampedin' the herd Pete—right down the big middle of town!"

"Stampede!"

"These longhorns are already itching to run," Irish reminded. "Clouds getting heavy, likely to have some lightning. It won't take much to set 'em off. Then Bonfils and all his crew and all hell can't stop 'em! They'll pour through Cherokee like it ain't there, right on across the river. And it'll be legal!"

Pete gave a long, low whistle. "If you can pull that off, son, I reckon nobody will ever have any more doubts about you. Why the whole dang state of Texas will owe you a big vote of thanks! Sounds locoed as a drunk goat, son, but what a holy hell of a mess it will be!" The old man chuckled happily.

A rider pulled up from the side. "Man back here, Irish," he reported. "Says he wants to see you. Name of Linder. And there's a woman with him, too. Not bad looking, either—from what I can see!" He grinned in the dark.

Irish and Pete reined up. Out of the dark came two horses, and the figures of Johnny and Mary Linder loomed out.

"Bonfils has his crowd gunning for you, Irish," Linder said briefly. "I barely got out of town myself. Cleft showed up—half dead. Then you killed two of his top gun sharks. They're all set to pour down on you tomorrow morning. They figure on wiping you out. Thought the least I could do was come tell yu. Didn't know you already had your herd on the move."

"Jim," Mary Linder said fearfully, "Isn't—isn't there something you can do, to avoid them, I mean?"

"You two keep laying low," Irish said. "Mary, why don't you drop back and ride along with the chuck wagon? Tell Pancho I sent you. You can even ride inside it if you want to. Go along with her, Linder."

A RIDER named Tony came up and reported the cattle were getting more restless, up at the point of the herd, and were hard to handle.

"Just let a coyote slink into the herd, or the lightning start, or a stray Indian show up, and we got a real stampede on our hand," Tony said sourly.

"That's just what we want—in the next half hour," Irish startled the man by saying. Then he told Tony briefly of his plan. The hand rode away, cursing happily in the dark. Pete Tolbert left Irish to ride around the herd and notify all the men. He sent a man riding away to see Stromberg, to ask him to join the melee with his five thousand head.

It was half-way between midnight and dawn when the mass of cattle in Irish's herd started down the last slope into the dark town clustered below, and into the deserted, unsuspecting street. The riders had their orders.

"Keep to the back streets after the hell-raising begins," Irish told his riders. "No horse alive will be able to stand up in that beef earthquake when it gets started! And watch handy for Bonfils' men in the alleys!"

A rider came up to say that Stromberg had roused his camp and was

moving his big herd in immediately behind them.

"He thinks you're as ungumptioned as a toad in a cider barrel but he says he'll be right with you," the rider reported.

The town was sleeping. Slim and Andy, riding point, led the way into the street.

Riders along each flank began to joust the flow of animals into the bottleneck of the shack-bordered thoroughfare. The longhorns were nervous. The stream of the wild range animals slowed as the course narrowed between the first double row of plank sidewalks and frame buildings.

Irish pushed his big horse into the vanguard of the horn-tossing, angry herd. It was a job he had decided to do himself, rather than assign some other rider to the dangerous task. He spurred in among the packed longhorns. He suddenly let out a Cherokee warwhoop. He struck a match, and commenced swinging in the air a flaming gunnysack, soaked in coal oil from a lantern.

The startled animals went wild with terror. The stampede was on. Slim and Andy turned back from the lead, yelling and firing their guns into the air, and this caused the lead steers to turn wildly back, only to be met by the onrushing horde from the south. That formed a circling, whirlpool movement of gigantic force. Lumber began to crack.

Irish's horse was caught in the ferocity of the stampede. The weight of the milling, blindly-charging longhorns carried him upon a sidewalk, against a frame wall. The wall, unable to longer stand the pressure of surging tons of mad beef, caved inward. Across the street he heard another crash. Still the steers poured in from the south. Cherokee Crossing was breaking at the seams.

He worked his horse across the wreckage of the saloon in which the tide carried him. Bawling steers flooded in, the momentum crashing the back wall outward, and his mount was carried out like a chip on a tide.

Like tons of landslide boulders, the frenzied giants were plunging and crashing into everything on main street. Irish could trace their progress toward the river by the succession of sounds of wreckage. He hoped Slim and Andy had escaped out one of the narrow alleyways, ahead of the stampede.

He spurred his horse around to an alley, until he could see the turmoil in the street. The bedlam of falling framework heightened the terror of the panic-stricken cattle. He saw the mass of them roll on like a tidal wave. The pressure of them from side to side in the street and their milling motion carried away walls, walks, and timber. Posts collapsed, awnings fell in, store and saloon walls cracked and split open.

Animals went down in the wreckage and other animals careened on over them. The weight of it all was more than Cherokee Crossing's flimsy business structures could stand.

Irish watched the unbelievable destruction sweep on, and thought that even in the conflict of war he had never seen the equal to it.

Pete Tolbert pounded up behind Irish in the alley.

"Bonfils' men'll be waking up and be out with guns any minute," he yelled above the din. "But it won't do 'em any good—you couldn't stop them critters with a battery of cannon!"

"All the men safe?" Irish called back.

"Yeah . . . Damn me, we'll never get these steers rounded up again, son, but it's worth the trouble! Hell—there's a bunch of 'em in the hotel, they've wrecked the saloons, and longhorns'll be rolling out of the stores this time next year!"

Gunshots blasted out somewhere in the dark. "That'll be the Bonfils outfit!" Irish warned Pete. "Keep your eye out!"

A rider found Irish to tell him that Stromberg's herd already was on the move and would soon be jamming into the town behind the first wrecking herd.

"You ought to see that Red Saloon!" the man yelled jubilantly before riding off. "Them longhorns are streaming in the front and out the back! Looks like free range in there! One old cow came out wearin' half a piano, and they ain't enough bottles that ain't busted to furnish likker for a toddy for my grandma!"

The man rode away, and a burst of firing sounded close by. Two riders came plunging into the alley from the other end, and bullets roared down toward Irish and Pete.

"Bonfils men!" Pete yelled.

Irish already was throwing back answering fire, and a Bonfils rider toppled out of the saddle.

Irish knew that this was the real showdown. Spade Bonfils' town by daylight would be a dismal scene of destruction. It was a dangerous, costly move on his part, he realized. But lawlessness and murder must be met, he had decided that afternoon, after grave consideration, by appropriate retaliation if the country was to survive, if the whole cattle industry was not to be wrecked by the greed of one unscrupulous man. The stampede of the cattle had taken care of one phase of the operation. Now if he and his herd crew could fight off the desperate, murderous counter-attack by Bonfils' gunslingers!

IV

IRISH and Pete sat their horses there in the gloom of the false dawn while the longhorns roared and bawled in the street behind them. The two men returned shot for shot of the firing that came from the back of the stores. Then a horse came running at break-neck tilt out of the darkness and Irish knew the big figure in the saddle was the wrathful hulk of Spade Bonfils.

The oncoming horse careened down upon Irish.

Irish and Pete simultaneously threw themselves from their saddles and huddled against the wall.

Another rider was plunging up the alley behind Bonfils' mount.

As Bonfils' horse neared the two crouching men, a flash of lightning showed the snarling face of the king of Cherokee Crossing, showed the upraised shotgun, and both Irish and Pete fired together, but Bonfils' mount now seemed out of control and kept racing down upon them. The rider who followed fired one shot, and it seemed to Irish he fired at Bonfils, rather than at the two of them flattened against the builidng.

Bonfils' horse made a great, leaping plunge that carried it past the two men. Bonfils was seen dropping the shotgun to clutch the saddle horn, and then his horse skidded, plunged again, and tossed headlong to the mouth of the alley, going down.

Bonfils was thrown head-first, over and over, and catapulted into the mass of longhorns jammed in the street beyond.

The big man gave one terrified, anguished scream. They saw him disappear into the mass of cattle, then all was silent. Bonfils was down in that maelstrom of mighty hoofs.

The oncoming rider pulled up.

"Linder!" Irish exclaimed. "Thought you stayed with the chuck wagon!"

"I followed you on in," the land agent panted. "Decided I ought to get Bonfils' deeds to the crossing grounds and cancel 'em—I got a legal right to do that, Irish, and that'll end that part of your problem. I circled around and got into the Red Saloon and destroyed these papers before the cattle wrecked the place. Bonfils caught me coming out, but he missed me, and then I reckon he was so hot to get to you he didn't take time to try to finish with me."

"Your shot plugged his horse in the rump," Pete Tolbert commented, "and he plumb went wild. He shore sailed that man Bonfils over into the stampede like he was aimed out of a rifle."

Irish mounted and they followed him at a fast clip through back streets, toward the river. Herd riders there already were trying to string the flow of cattle into the water, and the crossing was already begun. There would be plenty of roundup work after daylight, but Irish saw the momentum of the stampede would carry most of the longhorns across, and after that it would be a matter of finding the strays.

New firing broke out at the south end of town.

"Stromberg's crew have hit!" Irish yelled. "Look—here comes a fresh stampede! His stuff will take over where ours left off with that town!"

A close-packed band of riders showed up in the dark, plunging toward Irish, Pete and Linder. A volley of lead roared out, and Linder toppled to the ground. Irish was firing again, and Pete Tolbert's horse was plunging, wounded.

"Bonfils' men!" Irish hollered again. His own riders were about, but scattered in the dark. It was hard to tell friend from foe, but the on-coming horsemen and the gun flashes meant business. He fired

carefully into the group, seeing two horses flounder and fall, then a familiar, fiery pain stabbed him in the arm and he felt blood soaking his sleeve.

Linder and Pete were sprawled on the ground, still firing. A Bonfils' man toppled from the saddle, and the charge of the horsemen turned and skidded aside.

"Bonfils is dead!" Irish yelled in that second of silence. "Bonfils is dead!" he yelled again. "You want to drag from town now, or stay and fight it out?"

The horsemen were turning for another charge. "Hold your fire a minute," Irish warned the two men on the ground.

He raised his voice again: "You Bonfils men — your boss is dead. Cherokee Crossing is done for. What do you want—bullets and hanging before the next sundown, or you want to collect your crew and high-tail it from Texas for good?"

Another rider, coming from the town, joined the huddled horsemen. "Bonfils is dead, all right," Irish heard him reporting. "And another big herd of steers has hit the town, and a new set of herd hands with them, shootin' at everybody in sight. Let's get to hell out of this place!"

That was the end of it for the dumbfounded, leaderless Bonfils organization. horsemen turned away, scattered, and raced their horses out of sight in the darkness.

"You two all right down there?" Irish was asking Pete and Linder. His own voice sounded far away. He heard an affirmative answer, but it came only vaguely to his ears. He only felt the pain in his arm, the sopping feel of blood-soaked clothes. Then he closed his eyes and swayed in the saddle, and would have fallen if Pete had not jumped to steady him.

Irish thought he was again sprawled in the sand of the flooded Red River, but the sand now was hard and rough and bumpy, and the touch of water on his hand was strangely warm and soft. He opened his eyes and stared up to the tarp-covered top of the lumbering chuck wagon. His eyes cut to one side, and he was looking into pools too deep and blue to be the Red River and he recognized Mary Linder, and then he knew it was her hand that held his own.

"You're all right, Jim Irish," she whispered.

"Where are we?" Irish said in a moment.

"This is your chuck wagon—we're up in the Indian Nation," she replied. "The river already is a day behind us. And your cattle are in herd again and headed for Abilene—and Pete says your losses in the Cherokee stampede weren't so very bad. So close your eyes again and don't worry about anything. I don't know for sure what your job was for the Texas cattlemen, but I think you did it to everybody's satisfaction!"

He closed his eyes and reached up to touch her hand. "Linder," he murmured. "Johnny—is he. . . ?"

"He's determined to make you a good cowhand," Mary said. "To me, that's the finest thing of all that's happened." She added in a soft murmur: "Almost the finest, I mean."

He opened his eyes again and caught the unguarded expression on her face.

Irish grinned happily. The bumpy wagon, rolling northward on the Chisholm, suddenly felt as soft to him as the Red River sand. "I know what you mean, I think," he said. "Tell Pete to put him on the payroll—a man can't lose by swapping a bad step-brother for a good brother-in-law!"

THE DEVIL'S DEPUTY

By W. F. BRAGG

Of all the badge-toters, only a fool kid with greenhorn-guts dared tackle Buckshot, the wily outlaw, in that frigid death-trap—Freeze-out range.

THROUGH the smoker's forward window, Joe Jones watched brown badland hills flash past as the limited rolled northward. It was cold out there, with black clouds gathering along the mountains. Warm in here where men lounged and smoked, listening to the thump of wheels on the rails. But young Joe wasn't enjoying the ride. For cuffed to his left wrist sat sullen red-browed Buckshot Fagan, heading for the state pen to serve life for murder.

Fat Doc Slenker, undersheriff of Piute County, faced Joe and his prisoner. Doc was enjoying this ride. His dark eyes twinkled in his fleshy face as he orated loudly for the benefit of listening passengers.

"You're guarding a dangerous man, kid," Doc said grandly. He paused and lit a cigar which the fat drummer across the aisle had just handed him. "Just because you caught Buckshot, don't get all swelled up. You take orders from me, like the sheriff told you, and we'll get him to the pen okay."

Joe nodded. Perhaps he had displayed too much pride in wearing the star. Youngest man on the Piute sheriff's force, he had captured Buckshot when the outlaw chief came alone to a stage station saloon for a drink. His gang still rode the Wyoming hills.

"I'll take orders willin'," he told Doc. "But don't you think we should chain Buckshot to the seat? If the gang should

jump us, I'll only have one arm clear for fightin'."

Doc waved an airy hand and blew smoke. "The gang knows I'm along," he laughed. "They won't try nothing."

The limited whistled for the stop at Mud River.

"Just the same," Joe began uneasily.

Suddenly Buckshot, leaning forward, almost spat into Doc's face. "You runnin' for sheriff or somethin'? Makin' big talk so everybody can hear you?"

Doc lunged and slapped Buckshot across the mouth. As he poised his hand for a second blow, Joe jerked back his prisoner and warded off the blow with upraised forearm. . . . . .

"Don't hit him again," Joe said. "He's handcuffed and helpless."

"I'll slap off his big ugly mouth!" stormed Doc.

"You won't slap nobody," said Joe, tapping the hilt of his gun.

The train halted briefly at the water tank just outside Mud River.

"Thanks, kid," said Buckshot. "This Doc is nuthin' but a big yellow hunk of rat cheese"

"And you," Joe said, "you sit back and shut up!"

Anger reddened Buckshot's bony cheeks. He sat a prisoner now but not many days ago he had led a half dozen fighting men.

"If I was loose," he snarled, "I'd show you a few things. You need lessons—bad."

"Not from you," said Joe.

THE limited slid slowly down to the Mud River platform. The agent hurried out from the discarded boxcar that served as a depot. At his heels strolled three booted men, well clad against the bitter wind that whined down from the hills. One paused just outside Joe's window, waving a farewell to his mates as they swung up the smoker's front steps.

From the corner of his eye Joe idly noted the parting of friends. Not until the man outside swung suddenly with rising gun and crashed in the window pane with the long barrel did Joe take alarm. Then he moved too late. For as he sprang up, reaching desperately for his own weapon, a heavy body hit him amidships and he fell to the floor between the seats dragging Buckshot with him.

As he sat there, Doc's heavy body flopped across his waist pinning him down. A shot boomed in the car. A man shouted on the echo of the report. "Everybody sit tight and they won't get hurt!"

Joe tried for his gun but it was trapped beneath his legs. Nor did Doc offer assistance. The undersheriff sprawled across Joe, breathing heavily. His hat had fallen off. There was blood on the top of his baldish head.

"Don't try for no gun," said a man dryly. "There's two of us coverin' the car. Another on the engine. And Al keepin' tab outside. Just be a good boy until we throw old Buckshot loose on the range."

Buckshot staggered up, dragging Joe with him. Doc's body rolled under a seat.

"Hand me a gun" Buckshot said viciously. "Hand me a gun, Smitty. That fat slob hit me when Al busted the window. I'll put out his lights for him."

But Smitty objected. "Southbound train due in a half hour, boss. We got to git the cuffs off'n you and outa town. No time now for a little fun with Doc."

"Hell, he hit me in the face while I was all chained up."

"Well," said Smitty, "I hit him over the head just after Al broke the window."

"Fine," said Buckshot. "Let's go outside where I can get rid of these cuffs. You and Split Ear bring Doc."

Split Ear, stocky and bullet-headed contrasting with Smitty who was long and horse-faced, surrendered the sawed-off shotgun with which he was guarding the brakeman on the smoker's front platform. Buckshot watched the trainman while Split Ear and Smitty lugged Doc from the car and dumped him on the station platform.

"Come on, you," said Buckshot. With a vicious tug of the chain he dragged Joe down the steps.

Al fired a final shot to discourage inquisitive passengers. The engine slowly gathered speed. A man dropped off the cab steps flourishing a pistol. The limited slid away from Mud River while five outlaws and two forlorn captives watched from the windswept platform,

Joe's hope that some help might come from the half dozen shacks that constituted Mud River was killed by Smitty.

"We waited an hour for the train," the lanky outlaw remarked. "Time to stand this

town on its head. Nobody wants to start anything. They ain't lost any outlaws."

"When I smuggled the letter out of the jail to you boys," said Buckshot, "I didn't know where you'd make the meet. But it was a good one. Dig the key outa this kid's pocket. Turn me loose and we'll head for the Idaho line."

Smitty cursed when the key failed to unlock the cuffs.

"Too much jerkin' on the chain," he told Buckshot. "Locks are jammed."

"Hand me your knife," said Buckshot. "I'll cut myself loose."

"Hell," Smitty said, startled, "you can't saw through bone with a knife."

"Then rustle an axe from the depot," Buckshot thundered. "I can chop off this kid's arm."

Joe spoke for the first time. "There's a blacksmith shop up by the barn," he said. "Maybe you can find tools there to cut through the chain."

"Afraid of losin' your arm, kid?" sneered Buckshot.

"Naw. But even if I lost it, you'd still be trailing the chain and the extra cuff."

Smitty nodded. "The kid talks sense," he approved. "Come on, boss. No time to lose. Southbound's due in a half hour. Course, we cut the wires here but they'll pass word of the stickup at the next stop. Likely some law will be on the southbound when it comes in."

"Okay," said Buckshot. He nodded toward his men. "You fellows bring Doc along. After I get clear of the cuffs I'll take care of him." He laughed as he hustled across the hundred yards of dreary sagebrush between station and stable. "I'll take care of Doc *plenty*," he said to Smitty.

Split Ear stuck his bullet head in the shop's front entrance as Buckshot and Smitty dragged Joe to the anvil.

"We dunked Doc in the water trough," he said. "He's come too. Al's tyin' him to a horse so's he can ride with us."

"What for?" bellowed Buckshot. "I figure to leave 'em both here. But not so they can do any talkin'."

Smitty shook his head as he reached for a sledge-hammer. "Better not waste any time, boss," he offered. "Time we cut through this chain that southbound'll be pullin' in. Split Ear can hold a chisel. The others can ride on, takin' Doc with 'em. We can meet at the hide-out."

"Haul that fat hunk through a storm to the Idaho line?" roared Buckshot. "Not much."

"The storm's turnin' into a blizzard. We might have to hole up. Doc's undersheriff. Maybe we could use him for a trade if the law got close to us tonight."

"How about the kid?" asked Buckshot.

"Law won't miss him. Leave him here after we cut the chain." Smitty grinned evilly as he reached for a sledge hammer. "But fixed up so he won't never bother us again."

"You bet," nodded Split Ear from the door. "Teach 'em not to send greenhorns out on men's errands. If he'd shown any savvy, he'd uv chained you to the seat. We'd still be tryin' to cut you loose."

Anger flared in Joe as he faced Buckshot across the anvil. It was on the tip of his tongue to retort that but for Doc, the breakaway would not have been an easy one. But in the badlands results counted, not what might have been. Words of defense were counted as a whiner's talk. Joe stood silent as Smitty laid the chain across the anvil.

"Take away his gun," said Buckshot.

"No chance for him to use it," answered Smitty. Nevertheless he raked Joe's gun from leather and stuffed it back of his belt. He raised the heavy hammer.

"Holler to Al to get out of town with that hunk of lard," Buckshot called to Split Ear. "We'll meet at the hide-out. Then come back here to hold the chisel."

Errand run, Split Ear returned. Crouching by the anvil he pressed the chisel point against the steel link nearest the cuff encircling Buckshot's hairy wrist.

"Haul back so you draw the chain good and tight," Buckshot said to Joe.

THERE he offered Joe the first break. A forlon hope it was but the only chance that remained. The shop had front and rear entrances of double-door width to facilitate the handling of nervous horses. As he stood by the anvil, Joe's back was turned to the rear door. At Buckshot's command, he threw his weight against the chain. The cuff cut cruelly into his flesh but he did not flinch.

Smitty balanced the sledge.

"Just a minute," said Buckshot. Leaning

across the anvil, he ripped the silver star off Joe's shirt front. "Just a little souvenir of this meeting," Buckshot laughed. He tightened the chain, nodded to Smitty. "Hit 'er!"

Clang rang the anvil as the heavy hammer struck the chisel head. It was tough steel. It held. Buckshot cursed savagely. "That damn near tore off my wrist," he snarled.

Al thrust his head through the door. "Smoke in sight, boss!" he yelled. "Southbound's comin'!"

"Get outa town'" shouted Buckshot. "We'll follow!"

Hoofs boomed as Al and his mate galloped past leading the horse to which they had lashed Doc's fleshy body.

"Hit 'er again," Buckshot growled. "And hard as hell."

The sweat stood out on his forehead as though he swung the sledge. Outside, the wind droned around the shops roof. Suddenly, like the wail of a banshee, they heard the distant moan of an engine.

"Hit 'er!" yelled Buckshot.

Down thundered the sledge. The link parted. Buckshot, straining against the chain, went back on his heels. Joe, counting on sudden release, hurtled backwards through the rear door. With a wild yell, Smitty whirled and flung the hammer. It crashed against the door frame as Joe lurched through the opening.

Split Ear, still on his knees, dropped the chisel, drew gun and fired. His bullet whined over Joe's head as the officer turned and rushed toward the nearest cover that offered escape. It was a narrow twisting gulch into which junk from the shop had been dumped for years. He rolled down through heaps of old iron and discarded wagon wheels, chain rattling after him.

Scrambling to his feet, he glanced up and down the gulch. The walls were too high and sheer for easy climbing excepting where junk had broken off the rim. But a few yards below, Joe saw a turn. He rushed toward it, chain gathered in his hand. As he rounded the sharp corner, he heard a gunshot then the loud shout of Buckshot.

"Smitty, cut him off below!" There followed a clatter of tin cans and old iron as the outlaw chief slid down into the gulch.

Joe blinked his eyes against the snow that was now falling heavily. They had trapped him. He ran a few yards. His heart pounded against his ribs as he heard the thud of Buckshot's boots toward the rear. Once the outlaw overtook him, he'd waste no time in using a gun, Joe knew now how a coyote felt in front of a pack of hounds.

As he ran, he heard the wail of the engine siren again. The southbound was nearing the station. But if men of the law rode it, they'd never reach this place in time.

IN an angle of the gulch lay the mummified carcass of a horse. ome beast that had died in the stable and been dumped here. Ribs stood out whitely through strips of dried hide. Between skeleton and wall Joe saw a strip of shadow. He cast himself into the darkness, crouched there, never daring to breath as he heard Buckshot lumber past.

"Smitty," the outlaw boss bellowed, "where are you?"

"Up on top!" shouted Smitty. "He never got past me. Up where I can watch for that train."

"He's hidin' out somewhere down here," said Buckshot. "Watch the train while I'm huntin' for him!"

Joe lay taut, never moving, fearing that a faint rattle of the chain might betray him. He heard the returning thump of Buckshot's boots. The man would spot the skeleton, drag Joe forth for the kill.

Then Split Ear's cracked voice rang out shrilly. "Southbound's in sight, boss! I got the horses! Let's get outa here!"

Joe heard the heavy breathing of Buckshot as the outlaw halted near his hiding place. He nerved himself to fight for his life.

"He's somewhere in this gulch!" Buckshot spat out fiercely. "But where to look for him. All this junk, that dead horse over there—"

As Joe bunched his muscles, expecting that Buckshot would drag him into the open within a split second, there sounded the louder wail of the southbound's siren.

"Boss!" yelled Smitty, highly excited, "she's stoppin' at the depot! Boss—hustle up!"

Joe heard Buckshot's disgusted grunt as the big man turned away, the clatter of

tin cans as he crawled out of the gulch, then, later, the thundering hoofs of horses hurrying westward. His knees were shaky when he, emerging, asked the old stableman for a horse. Snow had mantled the earth but the tracks of Buckshot's gang still lay plain and black on the white prairie.

"Turned out all my horses," said the barn man. "Afoot, you'd never be able to catch one."

A half dozen ponies could be seen, grazing on the sagebrush flat near town. But Joe knew the futility of attempting to run down a range horse.

Armed men came up from the train. Impatiently they heard out the hostler's reason for lack of mounts then turned back to the depot to send wires to the county seat. A carload of mounts would be shipped to Mud River. But they couldn't take the trail until night came.

"Maybe they'll kill Doc Slenker," said Joe. "Let's all try to round up those ponies."

"If they kill Doc," grunted one posseman, "it'll be his hard luck for trustin' a greenhorn like you." He followed his mates to the depot.

"Loan me a gun," he said to the hostler. "I'll follow the trail afoot. Maybe I can mark it so's they can follow it easier when the horses get here."

"You'd play hell afoot in this storm tonight, Kid. It'll be ten below by dark."

"I'm follerin' that trail," Joe said doggedly, and turned into the storm.

The hostler took pity on him. "You're just a kid," he said grudgingly. "A man like me wouldn't worry none about losin' four or five outlaws. I got a gun hangin' up in the office. The gang stood the town on its head so I didn't bother to try for it."

"If I had a horse," groaned Joe, buckling the Colt belt about his body.

"There's one horse in that bunch will come to a nose-bag," the hostler said slowly.

"Why didn't you say so before?" Joe ripped out. "Get a nose-bag."

"But it takes a real rider to top him. He's bridle-wise but an outlaw. When the Flag Cross cow spread went broke, I took him in on the barn bill. He ain't worth a damn. They call him Stem Winder. If he gets a man down, he's apt to stomp him to death."

"Get that nose-bag," pleaded Joe. "I've ridden a few outlaws here and there."

"Ground's slick for ridin'," the hostler objected. But he filled the nose-bag with oats. With it, he lured the outlaw into the corral.

The Flag Cross outlaw was a raw-boned hammer-headed buckskin with a black stripe down his muscular back. He stood quietly enough, greedily munching the oats while Joe and the hostler saddled and bridled him. Then Joe gathered up the reins and reached for a stirrup.

"When I yell," he said to the hostler, "you jerk off the nose-bag, hit him down the hind leg so he'll head out the corral gate!"

"And right after that," grumbled the hostler, "I'll go out and pick up what's left of you in a wash boiler."

"It's my gamble," said Joe. He shoved his boot into a stirrup. He arose, high in the air, raising a yell as he slid his right leg over the saddle. Whang went the nose-bag against the buckskin's hind leg.

Several Mud River citizens, impelled by curiosity, crowded into the corral's gateway as the bawling pitching outlaw headed for the opening. Men leaped aside. One swarmed the side of the eight-pole enclosure with the speed of a cat.

"Kid," he bawled above the thud of Stem Winder's hammering hoofs. "Come back and round up the rest of the horses!"

And swinging and swaying in wet leather to every lurch and lunge of wall-eyed Stem Winder, Joe grunted miserably. "If I only could."

The hostler had spoken the truth. The Flag Cross horse was an outlaw, hater of any puny man who dared to attempt his taming. Joe felt every punch of the buckskin's braced legs against the earth from the base of his spine to the top of his head. Nor was he ashamed to choke leather when the sunfishing tricks threatened to unseat him.

A bit of earth, glassy from newly fallen snow, betrayed the horse. Stem Winder fell heavily, almost trapping Joe's leg beneath his body. Joe kicked clear of stirrups. He landed on his haunches beside the panting horse and he was glad of the brief breathing spell. Finally he arose on legs that felt weak. He gave Stem Winder a tentative kick in the ribs.

"Get up," he said. "Today you got to travel."

As Stem Winder staggered up, Joe was in the saddle. The fall had taken the wire edge off the outlaw's untamable spirit. If he reached safe dry ground, perhaps he'd start another battle.

"Into the blizzard," muttered Joe, tight hold on the reins. "It'll take one outlaw to catch another."

Stem Winder never reached dry ground that day where he might have attempted again to throw Joe. The icy whips of the blizzard punished horse and man cruelly. The wind that seared like fire, the frozen sleet that flew like buckshot, beat the life and heart out of the laboring buckskin and the man who slumped heavily over the saddle horn.

Joes hands felt like lumps of ice as they clutched stiffening reins. His coat was heavy but never designed to turn a blizzard. As the storm swirled around him, he felt its freezing clutch fasten on every bone and muscle in his body. He yearned then for a deep gulch where he could find shelter from the wind and dry sagebrush for a fire. But so long as hope remained of overtaking Buckshot he stayed in the saddle.

Joe knew this range. He rode a Flag Cross horse and recalled the days when that outfit had wintered cattle up on Freeze-out Flat. When he reached a wide sand draw that ribboned down from the flat, he found in a small bare spot under the overhang of the wall, the tracks of horses where men had paused to rest.

"Or figure on beating this blizzard," Joe whispered. "Any man or beast who's out tonight without fire or shelter won't last until morning."

SOMEWHERE up the draw was located a deserted line-camp of the Flag Cross. It offered the sole shelter in miles. The Buckshot gang undoubtedly had discovered it as they rode the range planning the rescue of their chief. Perhaps Al and his mate had ridden to some other secret hideout with Doc. But the tracks under the overhang indicated that Buckshot and his two men had headed for the line camp, never fearing pursuit in such a storm.

against the blizzard. His own strength was

On that slim hope, Joe gambled his life failing but he counted on the range wisdom of the Flag Cross horse. The animal had once ranged the Freeze-out country. They fed oats to working cow-horses in the winter time. He loosened the reins and gave Stem Winder his head. Through knee-deep snow the tough outlaw bore him. Drifts banked up along the high rim of the draw. Joe reeled in the saddle. He felt a curious urge to roll off and go to sleep. Then he knew that unless he reached shelter soon, he would freeze and die.

Still he clung to the frozen reins, the dim hope still burning far back in his mind, keeping his courage flaming, that one outlaw would bring him to another.

When Stem Winder halted finally in front of an open-faced shelter that had been dug in the side of a hill, Joe freed his numbed legs. He sought to dismount but his feet were like blocks of wood. He fell flat on his face, lay in the snow, while the buckskin pushed its way into the dark shelter where horses were tied over musty hay.

The horses resented Stem Winder's appearance. They kicked and whickered angrily as the buckskin doggedly pushed his way toward the hay. But he needed food for his cold belly. He would not be checked. That confusion of trampling hoofs aroused Joe. He mustered what remained of his strength and will. On hands and knees he dragged himself into the shelter. It cut off the lash of the wind. Warmth reached him from the crowding bodies of the horses. He pawed about until he felt hay in the darkness. He burrowed into it like a stricken rat. He lay there a long time, rubbing his hands until some of the numbness had vanished. But his fingers still felt clumsy. He carried a gun but only by vast effort could he draw it and then pull back the hammer.

The presence of horses here indicated to him that some of the outlaws had found shelter in the dugout near the stable.

But half frozen, clumsy with a gun, how could he hope to enter the place, go against armed men and warm? As he pondered that question, rubbing his fingers and wrists, he heard the thud of boots in the entrance, then saw the dull flash of a lantern.

A man stood outlined in the entrance. He wore a heavy buffalo hide coat. He

held the lantern high as he inspected the horses.

"Can't you cayuses eat your hay without fightin'?" the man snarled.

Joe recognized the voice of Smitty. It appeared that the outlaw had come here to check over the horses before turning in for the night.

Smitty stepped into the shelter. Joe saw the lantern light shining back from the walled eyes of the frightened ponies.

"By Hell," whispered Smitty. "There's something wrong here. That buckskin—"

It was as though a giant hand lifted Joe to his numbed feet. He couldn't draw a gun. But a length of steel chain dangled from his left wrist. He used it as a whip. With it he beat Smitty to the stable floor. Then he sank down on his haunches for the sharp stern fight had sapped his strength. But the exertion had also put a fierce new warmth into his blood. He felt the strong beat of his heart against his ribs. When he breathed deeply, pain like a knife cut into his lungs. But finally some strength returned. He staggered to his feet. He crouched over the lantern, staring down at Smitty while he considered his situation. And while he pondered, he warmed his hands over the lantern. And heard the steady champing of the buckskin's jaws as the outlaw chewed on dry hay.

"Only a damn fool horse and a greenhorn would try it," whispered Joe. He laughed shakily. "Buckshot wouldn't figure on anybody ever followin' him tonight."

Buckshot lounged in front of a red hot stove. In the rear of the long room, Al and his mates bustled about preparing supper. On a bunk near the door, Doc lay groaning.

"Quit your snuffling," Buckshot ordered. "If you weren't an undersheriff—and maybe worth keepin' alive for awhile—you'd be long dead and gone."

The door opened to the blast of the howling wind. A man stood framed there, holding a lantern above his head, its light fluttering wildly in the gale. He wore a buffalo hide coat. Shadows beneath the brim of his hat obscured his features.

"Come in!' bellowed Buckshot, never stirring from his seat. "Come in and shut that door!"

"Thanks," said the man. He took one long step into the dugout. Bending swiftly, he placed the lantern on the floor. As he straightened, Buckshot growled. "Blow it out." And then, leaping from his seat, reaching for his gun. "Hell—you ain't Smitty. I heard the rattle of the chain. You—why you're the greenhorn!"

"You bet," said Joe, and shot Buckshot through the point of his right shoulder before the outlaw boss could throw a bullet. The slug knocked Buckshot to the floor where he lay writhing.

Taken by surprise, Al and his mates stood gaping. Then Split Ear made a wild dive for the lamp on the table. The dugout shook to the thunder of Joe's gun. Split Ear went down as though he'd been hit over the head with a sledge hammer.

Al and his remaining mate slowly raised their hands. Al still clutched a frying pan.

Joe said to the amazed Doc. "Go over and take away their guns."

Doc obeyed, ranging the two against the rear wall. Returning, he paused, bent and pressed the barrel of Al's gun against Buckshot's painfully laboring breast.

"He needs killin'," said Doc.

Joe waved his pistol barrel. "Not from you, Doc. Take a gun belt, pass one end through the cuff on his wrist, and picket him to the table leg. And while you're doin' it, unpin that star he's wearin'. I came after it. I want it bad."

Reluctantly Doc obeyed. "I can't see where anchorin' him to the table does any good," he grumbled. "Let me put a bullet through his head. Then our worries'll be over."

"Sheriff's order was," said Joe, "to deliver Buckshot to the state pen to serve a life term. He can't very well serve out life if he's dead. So I'm takin' him in alive."

"Only a greenhorn would fool around this way," growled Doc.

Joe laughed. "That's right," he said. "Only a greenhorn. Buckshot figured the same way. That's where he made his mistake. Never can tell just what a kid will do." He nodded to Al and his friend. "Don't forget it, boys. And we'll all be alive at daybreak. Now—" he stepped to the hot stove and grinned at the touch of the generous heat, "go ahead and cook supper."

Belle Starr--

BANDIT QUEEN!

WALTER GALLI
REWARD
$10,000
IN GOLD COIN
Will be paid by the U.S. Government for the apprehension
DEAD OR ALIVE
of
SAM and BELLE STARR
Wanted for Robbery, Murder, Treason and other acts against the peace and dignity of the U.S.
THOMAS CRAIL

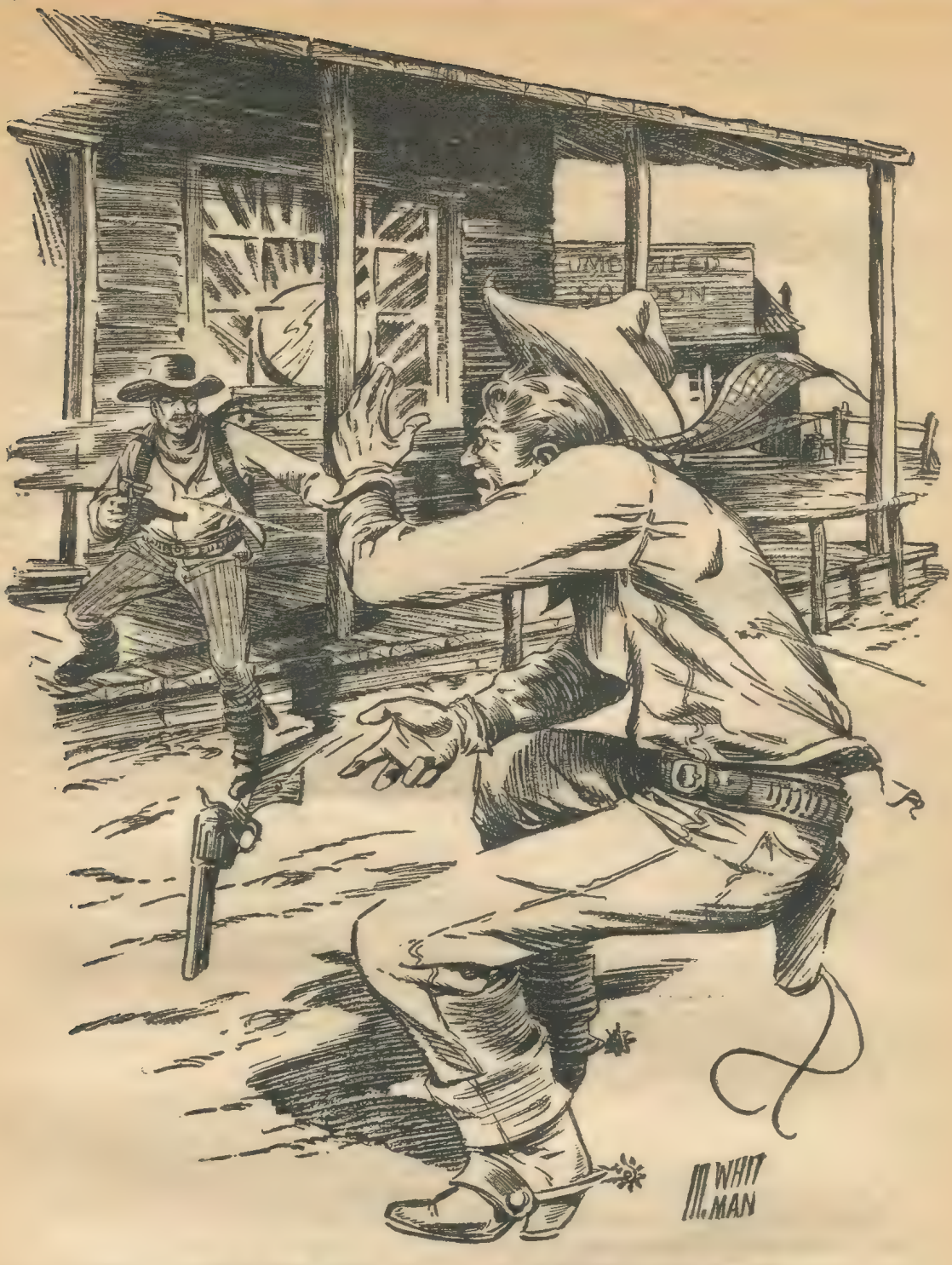
AS WILD AS THE WEST SHE WAS PART OF--THAT WAS **BELLE STARR**! SHE WAS TOUGHER THAN RAWHIDE--COULD RIDE, SHOOT AND CUSS ON EQUAL TERMS WITH THE BAD MEN OF HER DAY--AND OFTEN, **BETTER** THAN MOST!!

SHE WAS BORN **MYRA BELLE SHIRLEY**, IN CARTHAGE, MO., ON FEB. 3, 1845--THE DAUGHTER OF A CULTURED AND RESPECTABLE SOUTHERN FAMILY.....

BELLE WAS STILL IN HER TEENS WHEN SHE HIT THE OUTLAW TRAIL!

AMONG HER FRIENDS SHE LISTED **JESSE JAMES** AND **COLE YOUNGER** --THE LATTER BEING THE FIRST OF HER **MANY** LOVES...HER BASE OF OPERATIONS WAS THE OLD **INDIAN TERRITORY**--THIS WAS AS IT SHOULD BE--FOR IT WAS A HAVEN FOR THE WEST'S MOST NOTORIOUS DESPERADOES. ONE OF HER NUMEROUS MARRIAGES WAS TO **SAM STARR**, A CHEROKEE INDIAN...THE VIVACIOUS BELLE ONCE HELD UP A BANK IN NORTH TEXAS SINGLEHANDED--GETTING AWAY WITH A CONSIDERABLE AMOUNT OF CASH!

HER FANTASTIC CAREER CAME TO A VIOLENT END WHEN A COWARDLY NEIGHBOR, NAMED WATSON, SHOT AND KILLED HER FROM AMBUSH ON HER 43rd BIRTHDAY.....!



GUNMAN'S REP

By BEN FRANK

A crazy trick of fate had given Clay Corbin a false gun-rep. Would Lady Luck side him again when he threw down on the King of Sixes—Fanner Farrow?

ED MILLER shoved Clay Corbin's heavy poke into the big Wells Fargo Express safe, swung the steel door shut, and shuffled back to the counter. He stood very straight and respectfully before the stocky, wide-shouldered miner.

"Mighty fine diggin's you've got, Mr. Corbin," he said politely. "Reckon it

won't be long till you'll send for the missus and the little girl, Mr. Corbin?"

The little man's awed eyes fixed on Corbin's six-gun, and he wiped a trickle of sweat from his seamed forehead.

Corbin straightened his gun belt and smiled thinly, but his gray eyes softened. Mary and little Nancy! It had been almost a year since he'd seen them.

"A couple more hauls like this, Ed," he said, "an' I'll be wirin' 'em to come."

He left the office and sauntered along the crooked, sun-scorched street of Gold Gulch. His lean, craggy face still carried the smile, hiding the raw worry that was in him. It amused him the awed way people looked at him. But it worried him, too.

Ever since he'd gunned the Gold Coast Kid, his reputation as a gunman had grown like a wind-lashed forest fire. That was what amused him. The thing that worried him was the knowledge that he wasn't a gunman.

Sure, he could shoot, given plenty of time, but he was slow and awkward. At forty a man can't learn to handle a gun expertly. Corbin knew that. He was forty and had never had a six-gun in his hand until less than six months before.

The street bent round a hill, and Corbin, following it, came face to face with a mob of people. The mob was a living thing, twisting like a snake, roaring like a tornado and clouding the air with fine, kicked-up red dust. Corbin stood transfixed. He'd lived all but the last year of his life in Ohio. He'd never seen anything like this.

"Hang him!" someone screamed.

"Let 'im go!" a voice bawled.

A sudden silence settled over the street. A whiskery man leaped into a wagon, funneled his hands around his mouth and began to chant, "Take a vote!"

The mob roared and began to surge around the wagon, then grew silent again. A woman began to sob hysterically.

"The poor boy!" she cried shrilly. "The poor boy! Let him go!"

A man rode toward the mob, leading a saddled horse. The muttering people melted away before his onrush. A white-faced hatless man leaped into the empty saddle. Someone shouted, "Hurrah!"

The man swung the horse around in a cloud of dust and disappeared into a side street. The mob, looking foolish, melted away like ice in the hot sun.

Clay Corbin drew a deep breath. "I'll be damned!" he muttered.

"You never can tell what a mob will do," a bitter voice said behind him.

Corbin turned quickly. The speaker, old Doc Storman, twirled his long white mustache. His round face was flushed.

"Come into my office, Clay," he said huskily. "I got somethin' to show you."

The office smelled sickeningly of medicine. Coming in from the bright glare, Corbin had trouble seeing at first. Then he saw the man sprawled on the long pine table. He was Steve Martin, marshal of Gold Gulch. He had been shot twice through the chest. He was dead.

"That," Doc Storman said harshly, his stubby finger pointing shakingly at the dead marshal, "was the cause of all the fuss outside. Squint Farrow killed Steve."

Corbin, looking at Seve's gray face, felt a little sick. Steve had been of the few men in Gold Gulch who'd stood for law and order. It had been Steve who had warned Corbin of the Gold Coast Kid and had insisted that he learn how to use a gun. He owed Steve a lot, even his life. He felt a rising anger sweeping away the sickness. Hell, Steve had been his best friend here in Gold Gulch!

SUDDENLY the little office filled with men—sober men with hard eyes and stiff faces.

A plump little man stepped forward, mopped his face with a red bandana and swore heavily. He was Nate Newcomer, the mayor.

"This," he said, looking at the dead man, "is a monument to misused justice!"

His angry eyes whipped over the room. "Boys, we've got to have us another marshal. One who ain't afraid of Squint Farrow. If he ain't put away, Ad Brook and his outfit is goin' to run Gold Gulch!"

Doc Storman gave Corbin a shove. Corbin stumbled into the center of the room. He steadied himself against the pine table. His fingers touched something sticky. Blood! A wave of cold anger swept over him.

"The man who killed the Gold Coast Kid," Doc said flatly, "is the man to be

marshal of Gold Gulch!"

Corbin felt the cold sweat creeping down his face. Newcomer's bright eyes fixed on him, bored into him and held his frozen.

"Doc's right," Nate said slowly. "Clay, you're the best gunman in Gold Gulch. An' you an' Steve was friends. I reckon there's no better man than you for this job."

The plump little mayor reached over and unpinned the lawman's badge from the dead man's shirt. The badge gleamed dully in his fat hand.

"I reckon Steve was the best friend you had," Doc whispered into Corbin's ear.

Corbin tried to find his voice. He wanted to tell these men that his reputation as a gunman was the result of a trick of fate. The words wouldn't come. The cold anger in him held him mute.

He felt a tug at his shirt. The mayor had pinned on the badge. Doc was shoving up his right hand, holding it there for him. The mayor's voice mumbled the oath of office. A murmur of approval went up from the men in the room. Clay Corbin realized dully that he was marshal of one of the toughest mining towns in Nevada. Inside he was scared and a little sick.

At last he and Doc were alone in the office. Alone except for the corpse.

The medico twisted at his white mustache. A satisfied smile sat squarely on his round face.

"When word gets out you're the marshal," he said, "I reckon Ad Brook will pull in his horns about tryin' to run the town."

Corbin had nothing to say.

"I'd make it a point to see Ad right soon," the old doctor said. "Ad understands gun talk."

The new marshal stepped from the coolness of the office into the glaring sunlight. The badge burned on his shirt front as he walked along the street. People spoke to him with awe in their voices, and he answered them quietly. He held the thin smile on his lips, hiding beneath it the cold fear in his heart. The killer of the Gold Coast Kid had only his false reputation to keep him alive. And he knew it.

He stopped in front of Ad Brook's Emporium and mopped the cold sweat from his face. This place was the headquarters for the lawless element in Gold Gulch. A man was a fool to walk in there when he couldn't back up his words with his gun.

Corbin almost turned away. But Steve Martin's gray face swam before his eyes, and he shoved open the batwing angrily. A wall of silence greeted him. He hooked his thumbs under his gunbelt and let his grey eyes sweep over the stiff faces that lined the room. His lips smiled thinly.

"I'm lookin' for Squint Farrow," he said quietly.

Someone choked over a cough, and the men tensed, their eyes frozen on Corbin's gun hand. Fear stood out on their faces like a raw sore, and Corbin felt his own fear diminish. The situation was almost laughable, but Corbin couldn't enjoy the joke. There was too much danger underneath it all for that. If these men knew how he'd been able to out-shoot the Gold Coast Kid—but he wouldn't let himself think of that.

Brook got up from a round-topped card table, his green eyeshade giving his thin, weasel face a sickish look. He kept his long slender hands away from the pockets of his black coat.

"Mr. Corbin," he said hoarsely, "Farrow is miles from here by now. I assure you I'll never let him come here again."

Corbin fished the makings from his pocket and began to roll a quirly without taking his eyes from the gambler's thin face.

"You're a liar and you know it!" he said quietly. "Farrow's your man, and you brought him here for his guns. You'd welcome him back in a minute. But I'm telling you, if I get my hands on him, he won't get off like he did today!"

The men in the room sucked in quick breaths. Their eyes fixed on Brook, watching fearfully for his next move.

Brook shoved up the great eyeshade. His face was as white as the soft silk shirt beneath his black coat. He looked at the marshal, his eyes stopping long on the big sixgun that had killed the Gold Coast Kid. The Kid had been the fastest man with a gun who had ever worked for Brook. The gambler's knees suddenly went weak on him, and he sat down, but didn't forget to keep his thin, white hands in sight above the table top.

"Mr. Corbin," he said huskily, "Farrow won't be back."

"Another thing," Corbin said, taking advantage of the fear he'd built up in Brook, "this joint stinks! Clean it up, Brook! An' keep it clean!"

Brook slallowed audibly. "Yes, Mr. Corbin."

Corbin put the cigarette between his lips. With it there, his smile became a twisted lear. He turned abruptly and strode through the batwing.

OUTSIDE, he was suddenly terrified at what he'd done and called himself a fool. He'd bluffed his way through this time, but there would come a time. He thought of Mary and Nancy back in Ohio, waiting for him to send for them. He shuddered and felt weak. He was in beyond his depth. It was time to get out.

He went into Nate Newcomer's hardware and furniture store.

"Nate," he said to the plump little mayor, "I reckon you ought to be lookin' for another marshal. I really don't have time for this job. I've got to keep workin' my claim an' get my family down here. I've—"

"Some of us have been talkin' about that," Nate said. "We're goin' to appoint you a deputy to sort of keep an eye on things, an' you can go right ahead with your minin'. As long as people know you're the marshal, I reckon it won't make no difference whether you're in town or at your claim."

"But Nate—"

"No buts," Nate said. "Now, you get right out to your diggin's an' forget this marshal business. It ain't goin' to interfere with your work one bit."

Abruptly Nate turned and bustled down the aisle of his cluttered store. "Got somethin' to show you," he called.

Corbin followed him into the furniture department. Nate stopped before a gleaming walnut bedroom suite.

"What do you think of this?" he asked proudly. "Right from the East. Nothin' like it in the state. Hauled it the last hundred miles by wagon." He ran a pudgy finger over the shiny surface of the dresser top. "Not a scratch."

Corbin stared at his lean, craggy face in the big plate glass mirror above the dresser. It had been a long time since he'd seen furniture like this. Mary would sure go for stuff like this.

"Looks like Gold Gulch is gettin' civilized fast," he grinned.

Nate nodded. "In some ways. But we still got the Emporium."

Corbin felt a wave of cold slide along his back. He kept the grin on his face.

"Yeah," he said. "That's so."

He went out, mounted his old roan horse and rode to his claim down on Lost Creek. The tight worry in him seamed his face. He was in too deep for his own good, but maybe things would work out. Maybe his hand wouldn't be called—but he knew better than that. Ad Brook wasn't whipped yet.

A day later, he learned who his deputy was. Old Guy Higgins. His heart sank. Higgins was a nice old fellow. But he wasn't a gunman. He'd be no help in a fight.

The sun stood like a white, blistering ball in the clear sky the next time Corbin took his gold to town. He rode down the crooked street past Newcomer's store. The walnut bedroom suite stood in the front window, looking out of place with the ordinary furniture about it.

Mary would go for an outfit like that, Corbin knew, feeling his heart beat faster just thinking of her.

He slid from the roan and went into the express office. Ed Miller took the little sack of gold and put it into the safe.

"Mr. Corbin," he said, "things have sure been quiet since they made you marshal." He looked admiringly at the six-gun lying snug against Corbin's right leg. "Your gun speaks the only language some people can understand."

Corbin smiled thinly and walked out of the office. He wished Ed Miller knew what he was talking about.

Before he'd taken a dozen steps, old Guy Higgins came puffing around a bend in the crooked street.

"Mr. Corbin," the deputy wheezed, "am I glad to see you! Fanner Farrow is in town, lookin' fer you."

"Who's he?" Corbin asked.

"Squint Farrow's brother. Fanner says no man can run his brother outa town without answerin' to him. But I don't think he's so much interested in his brother. I

figure Brook has brought him here. Fanner's faster with a gun than the Gold Coast Kid ever was, I reckon you'll have to meet him, Mr. Corbin—an' kill him!"

Corbin felt his stomach muscles crawl. His eyes whipped along the street, crossed to Nate Newcomer's store. The walnut bedroom outfit gleamed in the sun. The furniture that Mary would love! Inside, the marshal felt a little sick. Brook had brought in a gunman faster than the Gold Coast Kid.

This was Brook's way of calling Corbin's bluff. Corbin drew a deep breath. He reckoned he might never see Mary and the kid again.

Then he remembered how he'd been able to out-gun the Gold Coast Kid, and a sudden hope swept over him. At least, there might be a chance if—

His shoulders came up. Maybe he'd see Mary and the kid again after all.

"Where is this Fanner Farrow?" he asked.

"In the Emporium," the deputy answered.

"Guy," Corbin said, "I'm a miner, tryin' to get enough ahead to bring my wife and kid out West. I ain't got much time for this marshal job that's been shoved off on me. Right now I ought to be ridin' back to my claim. But if Farrow is lookin' for me, I'll be waitin' for him on the porch of Nate Newcomer's store. I reckon I can spare him fifteen minutes of my time—but no more."

He turned on his heel and crossed the street. He'd leave the rest to the old man. Fifteen minutes should be long enough for the deputy to get word to Fanner Farrow and to clear the street of people.

Nate Newcomer looked up over the rims of his glasses at the stocky, wide-shouldered miner as he entered the store. The plump little man was worried and he didn't try to hide any of it from Corbin.

"I saw Guy talkin' to you," he said. "I reckon he told you about Fanner bein' in town."

Corbin grinned crookedly and began to roll a cigarette. "He mentioned that," he answered.

"Clay, this Fanner's fast," the mayor hurried on. "Faster'n the Gold Coast Kid. You think you can—"

"This bedroom outfit," Corbin cut in, walking to the front window, "still for sale."

"Sure. Look, Clay, this Fanner is—"

"My wife would like this," Corbin said. He ran his brown, calloused fingers over the shiny surface of the dresser. "How much, Nate?"

"I got a lot of freight money tied up in it. I'd have to have right at five hundred—"

Corbin tilted the big plate glass mirror back and forth. The thin smile never left his lips. "Five hundred," he repeated softly. He turned from the window and nodded. "Yep, Mary would like it."

Nate ran his tongue over his lips. "This Fanner ain't no ordinary gunslick, Clay. He's quick as a snake. Shoots from the hip. Fans his hammer like lightning. He's a killer. Wanted in three states so they say."

"Let you know about the bedroom outfit right soon," Corbin said. "Maybe in twenty minutes or so."

HE went outside and leaned a blocky shoulder against a porch post. The sun was well toward the West, burning against his face.

Across the street and to the left stood Brook's Emporium. Corbin fixed his eyes on the batwing and drew deeply on the cigarette. The street was empty of all life. Old Guy Higgins had done his job well.

A thin, tall man stepped through the batwing. That made two men in the street—Clay Corbin and this man. Corbin loosened his six-gun, knowing he was looking at Fanner Farrow. His shoulder stiffened against the porch post. He saw the thin man shift his gun a little forward, then step from the walk into the red dust of the street. The man walked carefully like a stalking cat.

Corbin had plenty of time to think. Or to turn and run to the roan horse in front of the express office and ride out of town. He didn't run. He thought.

At a time like this, a man can do a lot of thinking with one corner of his mind and not miss a thing that is happening in front of his eyes. Corbin remembered back to the day the Gold Coast Kid had tried to hold him up. When Corbin had hesitated about giving up the poke of yel-

low metal, the Kid had rushed forward and gone for his gun.

The Kid's gunhand moved like a brown streak. Corbin, in a split second of thinking, knew he didn't have a chance, but he drew awkwardly, expecting to feel the sickening impact of hot lead. But something happened to the Kid. He didn't shoot. He cursed and threw a hand over his face. Corbin squeezed trigger and saw the Kid pile up in a twisted, lifeless heap.

At first, Corbin had not been able to understand what had kept the Kid from firing. But now he knew. When the Kid leaped forward, turning slightly to avoid a hole in the trail, he got the sun straight into his eyes. For a blinding three seconds, he hadn't been able to see a thing. In those three seconds, Corbin had aimed and fired. That little trick of fate had given Corbin his false rep.

But now things were different. Fanner Farrow had the sun over his left shoulder, and Corbin felt it against his right cheek. The marshal hooked a thumb under his gunbelt and waited.

When Farrow reached the middle of the street, Corbin straightened, taking his weight from the porch post. His heart hammered crazily against his ribs, and the sweat under his arms felt like ice. He took a deep breath and held it.

Farrow's eyes met Corbin's. His long legs pumped slowly as he placed his feet carefully on the ground. Corbin's reputation as a gunman was fresh in his mind. Farrow wasn't taking chances of stumbling.

The thin gunman took two more slow steps and stopped abruptly. A queer expression came over his face. He lifted his left arm, and clawed with his right hand for his gun.

The gun came up, but for some reason he didn't bring his left hand down to fan the hammer. He cursed and staggered back a step.

Corbin brought up his own gun awkwardly. He fired before he was ready and knew he'd missed. Fanner's gun flamed rapidly, but the slugs ripped wildly into the floor of the porch. Corbin aimed carefully and fired again. The thin gunman caught at his chest and went down. He didn't get up.

Old Guy Higgins poked his grizzled head out of a doorway. "That did it, Mr. Corbin!" he gloated.

Corbin didn't feel like grinning, but he managed one. "Look after the body, Guy," he said, and headed across the street for the Emporium.

Brook was alone in the long room. "Hello, Mr. Corbin," he husked between gray lips.

Corbin's eyes were like bits of clear ice. "Brook," he said flatly, "this ain't a very good town for a dive like yours. An' it ain't a healthy place for you!"

Brook licked his lips. "That's what I was thinkin', Mr. Corbin."

"It's an hour before sunset," Corbin went on in the same flat voice. "You could be on your way before then."

The gambler took off the green eyeshade. "Easy," he choked.

Clay Corbin turned his back on the man and walked through the door. Halfway across the street, a blinding glare from Nate Newcomer's store window struck him full in the face. He closed his eyes against it and stumbled on.

He went into the store and grinned at the goggled-eyed little mayor.

"You did it!" Nate wheezed. "You got him—"

"I'll take that bedroom outfit," Corbin cut in.

Slowly he tilted the big mirror back and forth, sending the reflected sunlight up and down the crooked street.

It was the reflection of this mirror that had blinded Fanner Farrow, making him lose the fight.

"It's mighty pretty," Corbin added thoughtfully. "Mary's sure goin' to like it."

POSSE BAIT

By John Jo Carpenter

When it's cleanup time in gun-town, all mavericks are suspects. Chambro, Quill and Silvers were rated first on everyone's list.

IT WAS the kid, Sammy Chambro, who worried Red Quill. Red and the other fellow, Nemo Silvers, both had good horses, brutes that could stand the gruelling forty-five mile push to Yuma. Sammy's nag would have to have luck on its side to last another ten miles. Yet the kid's pale blue eyes were as recklessly carefree as ever they had been before the three of them were invited—at gun's point—to leave Sweet Wells. They could not go back, that was certain. The indignant citizenry of Sweet Wells had been pretty positive. Yuma was their next stop.

Up ahead, Red could see Nemo's broad back, atop his magnificent bay stallion, Fly. Nemo was pushing the stud only a little, holding him to the long-legged walk that would take them over the mountains and the fiery desert stretch beyond. Nothing would deter Nemo from that goal, Red

thought. Self-preservation was stronger in him than in most men. If there was such a thing as a human wolf, Nemo Silvers was it.

Behind Silvers, Sammy Chambro rode, grinning silently, wickedly to himself, as though he had known all along that the sands of his life would run out suddenly and violently—and before he was 23.

"Cain't figger out why they taken sich a dislike to you-all," Sammy said suddenly, turning in his saddle. "Take me and Silvers, they well off to be rid of us at any price. You, now—course, you did not go out of your way to make friends, Quill, but at least you worked. Nemo and me I doubt if we done a week's work between us in our lives."

Nemo rode on stolidly, his back giving no indication that he had heard the boy's gently gibing voice. The two had never been very good friends, to say the least. That they should find themselves adrift this way on a desert trail was one of the more bitterly comic aspects of the situation.

"No visible means of support, that's us," Sammy Chambro went on, with a mirthful chuckle. "We're plumb honored to have you with us, Quill."

Despite himself, Quill grinned back. He knew, if the others did not, why he had been driven out of Sweet Wells. He had whipped Dick Sparling in a fair fight, and from now on, every teamster and rider who came through the country would want to try his luck with Dick. Dick's long reign of terror was ended. No longer would he be able to pound the bar, of a Saturday night, and dare any two men in the house.

But he said nothing of this. Instead—

"Well, I wasn't exactly a solid citizen," he murmured. "And when the home guard takes a notion to clean up the town, all mavericks are suspects. I was ready to edge over a little anyway."

Still Nemo Silvers said nothing. Nemo had been Dick Sparling's particular sidekick up to about a week ago. Must be cruelly galling, Red Quill thought, to have that sidekick suddenly turn on you, and lead the mob that runs you out of town.

Again Chambro cackled gaily, and dug his heels into the bony ribs of his crowbait horse.

"You was a victim of circumstance," he said. "That's all—a victim of circumstance. Now, Nemo and me, we asked for it. I always reckoned I was the no-accountest feller in the world until I met Nemo. Two of us in one town is just too much to abide, I allow."

And suddenly Silvers turned, and his heavy face showed impatient anger under its three-day growth of beard. Nemo had been drinking heavily for those three days, sitting in a corner of the Desert Crossing saloon and glowering and growling like a mad dog. Not particularly brainy or bright, and his face showed it.

"You jabber too much, you Texas kid, you," he said, without emotion.

"Always was one of my failings" Chambro agreed, happily. "Could say you was always too silent. Might state that if you had put yourself out to give a polite howdy-do now and then, you might not have been invited to try the weather elsewhere. We differ there, Nemo."

"Shut up," said Nemo.

"—But otherwise we're birds of a feather." Chambro went on.

Red caught his eye and shook his head warningly. There was certainly no point in baiting the big fellow. They were three men on only two good horses, and if they were to reach Yuma they would have to start riding and tying soon. Didn't the kid see that? Or didn't he care? There was something suicidal in his attitude, as though he might be inviting Silvers to turn on him. Red and Silvers had been allowed to ride out with their guns, but the Texas kid's pair of silver-mounted pistols had been confiscated. To square a pair of bottom-dealt queens, somebody said, and probably with considerable justice.

THEY climbed steadily. They had left Sweet Wells just before noon. Dick Sparling had seen to it that they had only a running chance to get through. There was no shade. All three had eaten too much, and thirst would be a problem because the single canteen each was allowed would not last long. The higher they climbed, the worse the brazen sun became. Red, who had teamed over this same route dozens of times, calculated they would reach the top along about midafternoon.

But that would bring no relief, either. They would then drop down to the floor

of the Imperial Desert, and drop very quickly. The fine, white sand, more like the Sahara than any other American desert, would be dry as gunpowder, and long after the sun went down it would radiate heat. There would be two or three hours of blessed coolness, almost icy—after all the heat went out of the sand, and before the sun came up.

But long before then, Sammy Chambro's jaded nag would be dead.

It seemed that the heat or the realization of their plight penetrated into the kid's awareness at long last, because he talked less. Nevertheless, when he turned around, the indomitable light still glittered in his eyes. Red had worried, fearing Sammy would pull too hard and too soon at his canteen, but he did not. He might be inviting death by his mental attitude, but not by his actions.

Red wished he was up in front. It seemed to him Nemo was setting too stiff a pace. It would exhaust the kid's horse too quickly. He said nothing, though. Nemo had taken the lead when they left town, and there would be an argument if he was asked to pull the hammer-headed stallion back to the rear.

Behind Nemo's saddle was his blanket roll. Dick Sparling had permitted him to take it, for old time's sake, he said. Red and Sammy had not been so favored. Somehow, it did not matter much to Red, and he felt Sammy would say the same. As a matter of fact, it was just so much extra weight, on a trip like this.

Nemo uncorked his canteen and took two or three swallows, letting the tepid water trickle slowly over his lips, his liquor-parched tongue, and down his throat. And suddenly, it seemed to Red that Nemo, rather than Sammy, was using up his water too fast. He ought to know better, being no stranger to the desert; but a whisky thirst was a demanding devil of a thing.

"How'd you like a nice, cold bottle of beer?" Sammy said, as Nemo pounded the cork back into the canvas-covered flask. "Pull the cap off and let it foam down your throat, crisp and bity and cold, just the way it comes out of the cold bottom water of the wells. Then grab another one, and guzzle that one, and then another one—"

Red saw Nemo's thick arms tense, and the cords tighten in his neck.

"Shut up, Sammy," he said softly. "Go on, Nemo. He didn't mean anything. There's plenty of beer in Yuma. Think of it that way, Nemo. And Sammy, you shut up."

Nemo said nothing, but his tension relaxed a little. Sammy looked back over his horse's angular rump and winked. *So I'm to be peacemaker,* Red thought, with a slightly bitter inward grin. The thought was interrupted as Nemo, after a moment's hesitation, uncorked the canteen again. Red looked at the sun. Three-thirty, perhaps four o'clock, he judged. He shook his head as Nemo thoughtfully sampled the water.

"Lay off, Nemo," he said, in the most soothing voice he could muster. "That's your road to Yuma in the canteen there. That's your life, man. Can't you be more sparing?"

"You tend to your water and I'll tend to mine," Nemo said, with sudden anger, whirling in the saddle. The big stallion danced. Nemo quieted him and went on sullenly, "I'm not wastin' it, see? I just wet my lips, see? I didn't really drink none."

"All right," Red said. "All right, Nemo. Sorry I spoke. Not tryin' to be bossy, of course."

Sammy's horse stumbled and recovered itself slowly. As it walked on, its rump wobbled, as though it was having trouble controlling its hind legs. The beginning of the end, of course. Sammy shrugged and grinned back over his shoulder.

"Should like to see my old pappy's face if he saw me on this crowbait," he said, and the gaiety was a little strained. Sammy's lips were beginning to crack. "Pappy loves a good horse more than anything. Even his kids. Wonder now and then if —well, maybe things might be different, if the old man had been more of a father. I—well, I must be a little light-headed, Red. I haven't thought of home in a long time, or spoke of it in a lot longer."

"You talk too much," Nemo said flatly.

Suddenly the kid's broken horse stumbled again. He did not fall suddenly. He merely tripped with one forefoot, and went down on that knee, and rested there a moment. Then, when he tried to stand

up again, one of his hind legs collapsed slowly, and he lay down with such gentleness that the kid was able to step off unhurriedly. The horse lifted his head, threshed his feet feebly, and then stretched his thin neck out along the ground, nose pointing toward the top of the grade.

"Poor old hoss!" said Sammy. "Ever tell you how I got him?"

"No," said Nemo, "and I don't care. Don't want to hear."

"I WIN thirty-six dollars off James Packrat, the Yaqui that tends stable for Dick Sparling," Sammy said, paying no attention to Nemo. "Then I win his horse, that fine little pinto mare he sets such a store by. Then I win his wife's sewing machine, and four dollars she had buried in the sand. Then James didn't have no more to lose, see? And when he went to turn over the stuff to me, he cried with his arms around that pinto's neck, dogged if he didn't. So I said, go bring me some kind of a horse and he could have the pinto back. So he brought me this one. Ain't he a card?"

Red frowned. Sammy was certainly light-headed.

"Now what do we do?" Nemo said, hoarsely. "Shut up jabberin'. What you aim to do now?"

"Give me your gun," said Sammy. "I'll put the poor devil out of his misery."

Nemo shook his head.

"Ain't got but a handful of ammunition. Got to save it."

"But why?" said Sammy. "Nobody's going to shoot nobody." He rubbed his forehead. "Gad! I ain't used to this sun. My head's fit to bust. Come on, Nemo. Can't leave him lay here and die of thirst and starvation."

Nemo said nothing. He did not even shake his head. Red lifted his own gun out of its holster and said, "Catch!" He flung it at Sammy, who caught it expertly. The kid hefted the gun in his small hand a moment, grinning wickedly up at Nemo. No one had ever seen him shoot, but there had always been that air about him of an expert—and then, he had that deftness at cards which meant the perfect coordination necessary to gunmanship.

"Awful prizin' of your shells, ain't you, Nemo?" he said. "Can't spare one for—"

Suddenly, Nemo's big frame jerked, and the stallion reared. Red saw what was coming and tried to yell, but nothing came out of his dry throat. It seemed to him that Sammy saw it briefly, too. Nemo's gun slid out of its holster, crashed once, and then Nemo was holding both gun and reins in both hands as he fought to bring the stallion down.

"Steady, Fly! Easy, Fly! Steady, now!" he grumbled.

The gun fell out of Sammy Chambro's hands, and a splotch of red appeared in the center of his chest, and he folded forward, dropping on his face. The stricken horse threshed blindly as his dead master fell beside him. Red had dropped out of the saddle as he saw Nemo's gun flash, ready to run to cover. The stallion's misbehavior gave him his chance.

He dived for the gun, half burying himself in the sand of the dry slope, and was up on his knees with the gun levelled when the stallion finally became quiet. Nemo holstered his gun and looked down at the dead boy.

"Crazy!" he said. "Did you see the crazy look in his face? That's why I didn't let him have my gun. Did you see his eyes?"

"Yes," Red said, quietly, "and I didn't see anything to make you go for your gun."

"You was lookin' at him quarter-wise," Nemo said. "He was lookin' right at me. It was me or him. Put up your gun, Red. It was me or him. You heard him say he was light-headed."

The man's voice was reasonable—so reasonable that Red himself for a moment doubted his own senses. Light-headed was almost the way to describe his own sensations. He stared long at Nemo's heavy, whiskered mask of a face, but it defied analysis.

The right or wrong of a thing like this could be argued till the world blew up, anyway. Who was to judge what had been in Sammy Chambro's eyes, or his mind? One might say he had had only the tenderest motives, to put his horse out of misery. Another might say there was a homicidal insanity in those pale blue orbs—and who would be able to say now who was right?

"Sammy's not here to defend himself,"

Red found himself croaking. "I got to take your word."

"I seen it," Nemo averred. "You didn't."

Red put the barrel of the gun against his leg and tried to think. The sun was levelling down, burning horizontally into his eyes. The stricken horse stirred again. Red shot it, holstered the gun, and warily climbed back on his horse. But his wariness called forth no answering move from Nemo Silvers. The big man sat stolidly, until Red spoke to his horse.

"Wait a minute," said Nemo.

He got down and took Sammy's canteen from the saddle horn and shook it. It was more than half full. He pulled the cork and handed the canteen up to Red.

"Drink! It was him or me. And we cain't let his water waste. I'll whack with you or I'll take it all, suit yourself. Better drink. You're in a fix."

Red took the canteen and hoisted it briefly in the direction of Sammy Chambro's still body.

"Here's to you, you mouthy Texas kid," he said, repressing an insane desire to chuckle. "And many thanks!"

He drank a few swallows and handed the canteen back to Nemo, who drank without any theatrics, stoppered the canteen, and hung it on Red's saddle horn.

THEY rode on. They were very near the top now, and there was not much sunlight left. The moon would be another hour rising. The stallion had started to toss his head, creating a problem. If Nemo let him do it, he would work himself into a nervous state and increase his thirst, reducing his stamina. Curbing him would make his mouth sore, and it could fester in two hours in this heat. Once Nemo looked back and shook his head grimly at Red, but he said nothing.

No words at all passed between them. They reached the top of the grade, and Red pulled up beside Nemo. The two of them looked out at the floor of the desert, which lost itself in blue shadows miles away. And Yuma lay far beyond those shadows. This was the kind of view which prompted the saying that if a man wasn't crazy to come here, he soon would be that way.

"What do you judge?" Red said.

Nemo did not answer. Suddenly Red saw that the man was listening back over his shoulder. Silence fell, and Red's own ears strained. No sound came, but Nemo turned the horse and rode down a few yards and stood looking back the way they had come. His broad back was as still as a statue, and for once the stallion, too, was quiet.

Then the stallion stirred and stamped and cocked his ears forward, nostrils fluttering softly. Red, startled, stood up in the stirrups, and when he could see nothing, touched his own horse and rode down beside Nemo.

Nemo's face was impassive, but his eyes had narrowed. Toiling up the grade toward them was a long line of horsemen. They were still far away, and it would be another hour before they came to Sammy Chambro's body. Red's mind whirled dizzily for a moment.

"Ranchers?" he said. "Teamsters? How many do you count, and what do you make them to be?"

Nemo shook his head wonderingly and pulled back on the stallion's reins. The horse fell back a foot, and a chilling instinct made Red ease his own horse back. Somehow, at that moment, he did not want Nemo behind him. But when he looked into Nemo's eyes, he learned nothing. If it had been a maneuver for a shot, there was no way of proving it now.

"Reckon it's teamsters," Nemo said unconvincingly. "Let's push on. Go ahead, Red. Maybe this devil will follow. He won't lead quiet."

Red's eyes narrowed. It was hard to turn down an invitation like this. What Nemo said about the stallion was true, true enough to mean the difference between getting to Yuma and not getting there. It was also mighty convenient, in case that icy instinct was true, a moment ago.

"I'd prefer to follow," he said flatly. "No, I don't accuse you of anything, Nemo, but I'd feel a sight better behind you, after what happened to Sammy, back there."

The big man jerked, flinched and sighed, but his heavy face did not flicker.

"I can't hold Fly down. You can see that, Quill," he said, after a moment. "He'll go crazy pretty quick."

"All right, we'll let him follow," said Red, "but I'll ride him. You take my horse."

Nemo squinted.

"Better make up your mind," Red urged him.

"All right," said Nemo. "If that's the way you feel."

"It's the way I feel."

Both men swung down. Red started to hand his reins to Nemo, but Nemo was already pulling at the saddle cinches of the stallion.

"Don't need to change saddles," Red said sharply. "We're the same length of leg. Here, take my horse." The stallion threw up his head and whickered ringingly. "And snap out of it!" Red added. "They're not very far behind."

"I'll feel better in my own saddle," said Nemo, sullenly. "Go on, unlace yours. Or it's no deal."

"All right! But hurry up about it, Nemo!"

The big man sighed and pulled the saddle off with one hand. The blanket roll, laced tightly to it, came off too. Nemo stood holding the stallion with one hand, the saddle with the other, while Red pulled the saddle from his own horse.

And suddenly Red understood. Not until he was in the same position did it all become clear to him. Then Red's face—stony and impassive no longer—lighted up, and his eyes glittered with sudden triumph.

Nemo dropped the saddle and released the stallion's lines. His big right arm, thick as a stovepipe, flashed downward with incredible speed as the stallion leaped away, running free.

WITH the horses gone, there was no chance to reach Yuma—even though the canteens remained behind on the saddles—even though there were still three partly-filled flasks. But Red did not hesitate. It was that reluctance of Nemo's to surrender his saddle that had warned him. He let go of his own horse at the same time, and heard it jump away, to follow the stallion down the slope toward the distant, oncoming riders. He let his own saddle drop, and he reached for his own gun.

The two forty-fives crashed heavily together, and Red was thinking as that booming echo smote his ears, and as the hot flash of the two muzzles leaped at each other...*well, one of us will be going back to Sweet Wells pretty quick, I reckon.*

Perhaps he had freed his horse and dropped his saddle a little before Nemo did. Or perhaps he was merely faster in reaching for his gun. At any rate, he felt Nemo's slug tear at his shirt, searing his side as it sang past him. The big man's heavy jaw dropped, and he let go of his gun, and for a moment, was able to muster the strength to clutch at his chest.

And then he fell forward on his face, on top of his gun, and Red turned to look back down the trail.

"Sorry I didn't get wise sooner, Sammy," he said regretfully. "I guess I was a little crazy with the heat myself."

He was standing behind a rock, with both his gun and Nemo's in his hand, when the horsemen appeared. He had dropped down the trail almost a quarter of a mile to meet them. He let them all file past before he stepped out and shouted at them.

"Everybody reach! Quick about it! That's fine, now. One at a time, now, let's reach for our hardware and drop it into the sand. You first, Dick. And no false moves, Dick. You know I wouldn't want anything better than to kill you, Dick."

Dick Sparling licked his lips. He was shorter than Nemo Silvers had been, but he had a powerful muscularity lacking in Silvers. Also he lacked Silvers' brute impassivity. Hate glittered from his eyes, and the muscles of his face worked. For a split-second, Red thought Dick was going to draw, and precipitate a shower of lead. Red said nothing. A shower like that would get him, of course, but he'd get Dick Sparling first.

And Dick knew it. Slowly his hand went down, lifted out the gun, and dropped it into the sand. There were eight of them, and one by one they followed suit. Five of these men had been on the "committee" which, that morning, had given himself and Sammy Chambro and Nemo Silvers just five minutes to get out of town. The other three were good, solid citizens of Sweet Wells, and not Sparling men necessarily either.

"That's fine!" said Red. "Now, before we go any farther, I'm going to tell you that something has been discovered down in Sweet Wells that makes it pretty important that the three who were kicked out of town this morning be brought back.

We're not just worthless bums, I gather. There has probably been a robbery, I reckon, and you want the loot back. Am I right, Lew Sanders?"

He turned to one of the three who was not necessarily a Sparling man. Sanders had opened the first freight line into Sweet Wells from Yuma, and had graduated from that to a thriving cattle brokerage business. He bought in Mexico and drove through the Chocolate mountains to San Diego, and shipped by water from there to meat-hungry, gold-crazy San Francisco. Hard as flint, Lew Sanders was, but square as they came.

"Am I right, Sanders?" Red repeated. "What was robbed? How much is missing?"

A shadow of doubt flitted over Sanders' face, and as Dick Sparling broke into an angry tirade, Sanders grinned slightly.

"My office," he said, "of thirty thousand dollars, answering your questions in order. As though you didn't know!"

Red gave an answering grin.

"Those two details are all I didn't know," he said. "The rest, I can tell *you*. Nemo Silvers is laying back there up the trail a ways, as dead as Sammy Chambro was when you passed him down the trail. Except for luck, it would be me instead of Nemo. And Nemo would be standing here to hand over ten thousand dollars, that he 'discovered' on me—instead of me telling you that there is ten thousand in his bedroll!

"I thought it was funny Dick Sparling would turn on him and run him out of town, when less than a week ago they were friends! They robbed your office early this morning, Sanders, as early as Dick could get Nemo sobered up. Or perhaps Nemo robbed it, and Dick caught him, and figured out this clever way to plant the crime on someone else and save two-thirds of the loot. Which was it, Dick?"

Sparling turned to Sanders and said, "Lew, he's lyin'. You know he's lyin', of course! Don't you know he's lyin'?"

He might have had a chance to brazen it out, except for that haggard appeal. Sanders frowned doubtfully.

"First he killed Sammy Chambro," Red said, "when there was no need for it. I couldn't understand that—but it was to be made to appear that Sammy and I quarreled over the money, of course. Sammy, being dead, never could tell anyone what happened to the twenty thousand he was supposed to have stolen.

"But I didn't really catch on until I saw him make such a point of keeping possession of his blanket roll. Dick let him take that roll out of town this morning. He knew what was in it—none of the rest of us got a chance to see. Nemo *had* to keep that blanket roll, but he could afford to let his horse go. Why? *Because he knew he would be among friends when Dick Sparling got here!*

"Provided, of course, that the money was not found on his stallion. No, it had to be 'discovered' on me."

Sanders frowned from man to man and said, "Boys, maybe we've had the wool pulled over our eyes. Dick, would you care to tell us where you put the other twenty thousand dollars? Or would you like to walk to Yuma yourself?"

Dick Sparling told.

THE DEVIL'S SADDLE

By NORMAN A. FOX

A rollicking booklength adventure-novel featuring Rowdy Dow and Stumpy Grampis, a pair of quick-draw gents who crave to know just what makes an ordinary kak so valuable that a hundred men and a girl risk their lives for it . . .

WATCH FOR IT IN THE JANUARY ISSUE OF

LARIAT!

PAYLOAD TO RANDSVILLE

By ROLLIN BROWN

The fight was on. And Hell's Mesa was the bloody playground for rumbling stages, sweated horses and proud, grim-faced drivers, battling through a reckless, do-or-die freight-line war.

THROUGH the night ahead the lights at Cholla Ford appeared. The six-horse team swung down the cut, splashed through the shallow water of a stream. Stage wheels rattled on the boulders, and old Ed Bowers took up the slack on the reins with wind-numbed fingers, swinging his leaders across to the stage station. His boot jammed down on the brake bar.

"Ten minutes stop," Bowers called to his passengers. "Time for a cup of hot coffee, gents."

Eight passengers climbed out, stamping the stiffness from their legs, and entered the stagehouse. Old Bowers tossed reins to the hostler. There should have been a replacement driver waiting him here. He knew there wasn't. He was chilled to the bone—dog-tired like his team. He turned

slowly on the box and looked back toward the tall, dark wall of the rim. He'd had about a mile's lead on the Sewalt stage on the downgrade.

He got down stiffly from the box. The hostler and Gene Castro, who handled things here, were bringing fresh spans over from the corrals now. In the light from stagehouse windows Bowers noticed a saddled animal standing at a hitch rail, steaming in the late night chill, and wondered what this meant.

Castro, hooking a fresh wheel span into place, said, "Trouble in town, Ed. I don't know what, but they sent a rider out after Rowan. He'll be going on into town with you."

Old Bowers muttered something under his breath, moving on into the warm stagehouse. Trouble was all the Kincade-Rowan line ever had these days. Short of stock, short of freighters, short of waystations, men and stages. Short of everything that counted—except nerve and the guts not to give in. That was the Kincade-Rowan line. Old Bowers saw the rider standing by himself by the stove. He poured a cup of coffee, took a scalding gulp of it.

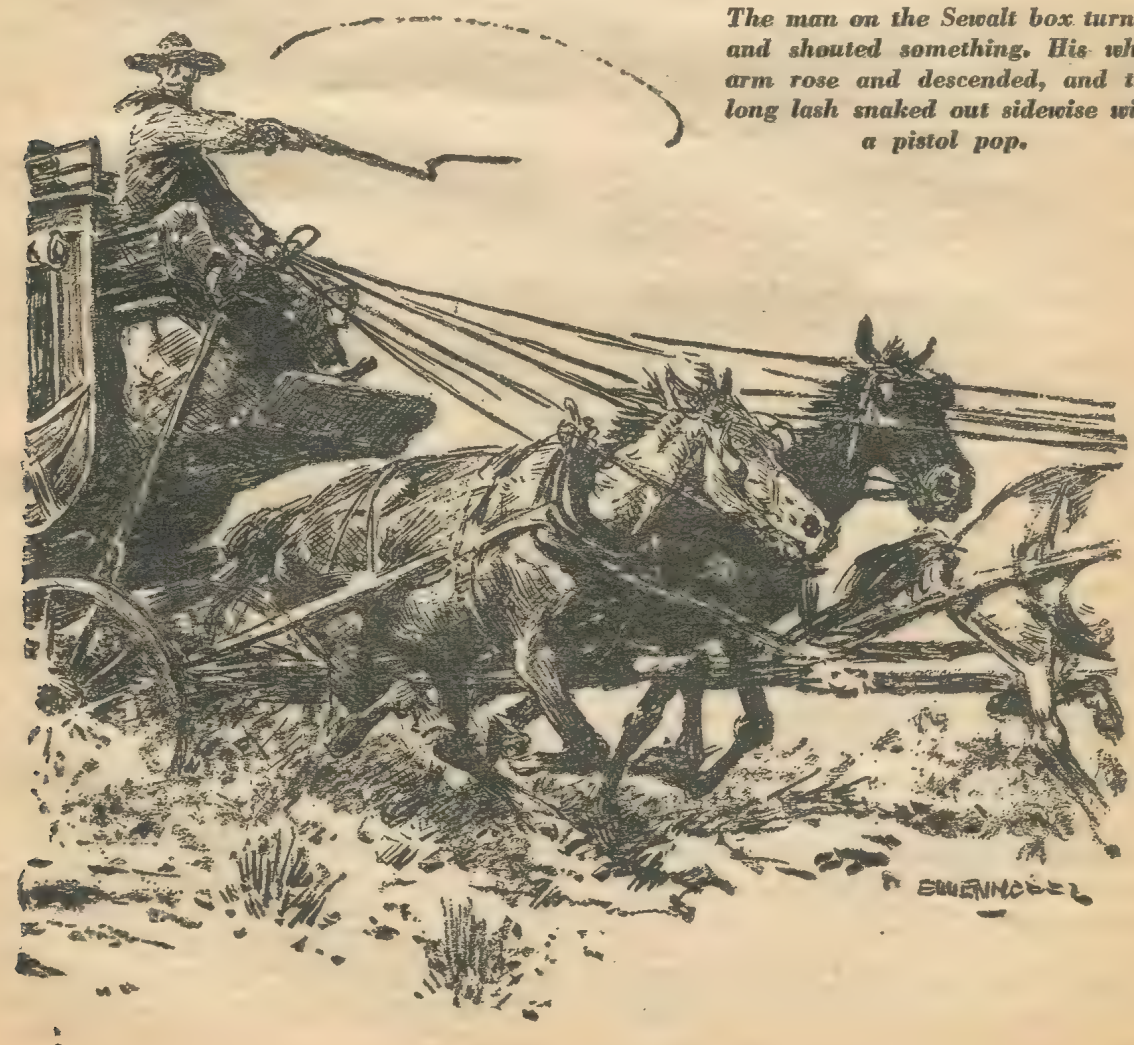
"What's wrong in town?" he asked the rider.

"Don't know," the man said. "Something about Big Dan. Hurt in some kind of ruckus in town last night."

"Hurt bad?"

"Couldn't say. I was told to get Jim Rowan fast as a horse could bring me here."

Old Bowers thought that over. Big Dan—Big Dan Kincade—was head man of the Kincade-Rowan line. If anything serious had happened to him, the whole long fight with Sewalt interests was just the same as finished. Big Dan had built the Kincade-Rowan line and held it together with the sheer force of his personality, with nerve,



The man on the Sewalt box turned and shouted something. His whip arm rose and descended, and the long lash snaked out sidewise with a pistol pop.

threats, praise, abuse and cajolery—and little else. And now if Big Dan was put out of action for even a short while . . .

The old driver cocked his head on one side, hearing the wheels of the following Sewalt stage hit the rocks of the ford, clatter through, and the run of hooves and rattle of undergear race past along the road. He'd beat the Sewalt stage this far by just about a mile—with eighteen, long-dragging, weary miles left to go before they reached town. Old Bowers drained his coffee cup.

"Time we're movin'. Where's Rowan?"

"Gettin' dressed," the rider said. "I'd just rode in when you come through the ford. Had to wake him after that."

A rear door opened and Big Dan's partner came through, pulling into an old sheepskin coat. A tall man, this Jim Rowan—ten years younger than Big Dan and lean to the point of gauntness, the way strain and too many hours in the saddle without rest leave a man. Kincade-Rowan put two stages over this road every day, and had half a dozen freighters on the haul all the time.

He had a lean, tight sort of face, so dark-burned that the gray of his eyes appeared almost pale as silver. He reached for a battered, dusty Stetson on a peg beside the door, nodding across the room to old Bowers with a jerk of his head.

"'Board," the driver called to his passengers. "Time we're movin' again, gents."

The wind up the canyon had a knife edge to it. Bowers climbed back on the box, pulling on his gloves, sorting the reins between his fingers, boot on the brake bar. The fresh team fretted, less anxious to travel than find shelter from the wind. Below him Bowers heard Jim Rowan close the side door on the last passenger. Briefly Rowan's lank frame was outlined in shadow from the running light. He swung up and hit the seat beside the driver.

"Hi-yup thar!" old Bowers shouted to the team. The animals hit the collars stiffly, feeling for the weight. The Concord rocked back on the braces and jerked forward, and within twenty paces was traveling at a run.

OLD Bowers buried half his face in his muffler. Eighteen miles left to go. The Sewalt relay station was two miles farther on the road. A thin, faint smell of dust lingered on the wind. Bowers looked sidewise at Rowan, hunched on the box beside him.

"Got any idea what happened or how bad Big Dan's been hurt?" he asked. The wind blew the words back in his throat. Rowan leaned forward while he repeated them.

"No idea, Ed," Rowan said.

But the harsh, throaty sound of his voice told old Bowers how hard this blow had already struck. He slowed the team while the animals caught first wind and swung on at a reaching trot. Through scattered cottonwoods along the creek, the lights of the Sewalt station winked into view. The smell of dust grew stronger here. In the yard hostlers were rushing fresh horses toward the Sewalt coach. No friendly hail between drivers in this night. Old Bowers didn't even turn his head.

The road left the creek, climbing a long broken ridge. The pace slowed from a trot to a walk, animals lugging on the traces. Once Jim Rowan glanced back, caught the flicker of following running lights, and said, "Half a mile."

The long pull was still ahead. Pale gray began to edge the high rim land to the east, leaving all else in shadowed blackness. The wind was cruel. But along the reins in his chilled, gnarled fingers old Bowers felt each animal of his team with an intimate contact that was just as good as eyes. He worked his chin up over the edge of his muffler.

"Off swing mare ain't pullin' right."

Halfway up the long grade, Rowan looked back again. The running lights of the other stage had moved perceptibly nearer. Old Bowers pulled his team to the edge of the road, and stopped.

"Take a look. See if that off swing mare ain't picked up a stone," he said.

It was a triangular piece of gravel wedged in the frog of the off swing mare's hoof. Jim Rowan got the hoof propped up between his knees, but his hands were too numb to be much use. He worked knife from pocket, opened the blade with his teeth and cut and pried the stone out. Before he had finished, the Sewalt stage pulled past with the driver using his whip.

Dawn was gray across the sky when they reached Twelve Mile Rock with the

Sewalt stage raising billows of dust across the open mesa. Old Bowers nursed his team, running on the wide sloping stretches, dipping into occasional steep-sided dry arroyos, slowed to a walk on each climb. But all this land, spotted with piñon pine and gray-green juniper, sloped toward Middle Wells now. Off there in the coming morning, Rowan could see the smoke of the town in a thin, darkish layer against the sky, and the black, tiny plume of a freight engine crawling from the east.

A yard here, another ten beyond, a hundred yards where the going was good . . . that was the way old Bowers overhauled the stage ahead. Talt Sewalt and whoever backed him bought better horses, owned more stock and made frequent replacements. Talt Sewalt used only good equipment, fed the best of hay and grain. But through the reins in his hands old Bowers felt each animal in his team, knew instantly when anything went wrong and whether a horse was tiring or only loafing and how much bottom was left in him. Day or night, it didn't matter. It was an ability he'd acquired from half a lifetime driving stage.

The billows of dust rolled up into their faces now. They breathed dust, ate it and coughed up dust. The Sewalt driver had his whip out again. Old Bowers kept his nose down in his muffler to strain out some of the dust. The reins told him all he needed to know, nursing the last ounce of speed from his team finally. A head of cedar that marked five miles from town flashed past.

One of the passengers—a mining man named Loomis—stuck his head from the side window and banged with a fist on the side of the coach till he had Rowan's attention. "Fifty dollars if you pass 'em," the miner yelled. "I made a bet before we left Randsville."

Rowan said nothing. The drop of the broad mesa lay ahead, slanting into wide cuts and draws that flattened out into the valley where Middle Wells stood—where something had happened last night, where Big Dan Kincade had somehow been hurt. Old Bowers' leaders crept up beside the Sewalt coach on the first wide turn. Brakeshoes scraped on wheels with a sharp, gravelly grinding. Old Bowers' boot on the brake bar just kept the traces tight, no more. His team moved up—another yard, reaching out. The dust was all behind now, rising to the sky above the edge of the mesa.

THE man on the Sewalt box turned his head, mouth open, shouting something. His whip arm rose and descended, and the long lash snaked out sidewise with a pistol pop.

Old Bowers' near leader reared in the traces, plunged and struck his span mate. The reins jerked in old Bowers' hands. His boot rammed down on the brake bar. Again the Sewalt driver's whip rose and fell and cut through hide to blood. Old Bowers' leaders were both in the ditch by this time, turned frantic by that lash in their faces. The old man reached along the reins. His voice to the team was calm, reassuring.

"Haw in thar, Buck. Pick it up, you roan. Hi-yup now—yup!"

The stage tilted far over in the ditch. Wheels bounced through rocks; brush scraped the coach. Then the team was back in the road once more, eating the Sewalt driver's dust; and Jim Rowan could never explain by what miracle old Bowers had pulled them out, avoiding an upset. The mining man named Loomis hammered on the side of the coach again. Jim Rowan paid no attention. His hands were clenched into tight fists. His mouth was a clamped, bloodless slit across his face.

The road curved down. But the Sewalt man's team had plainly spent itself—pushed too fast on the long ridge climb, crowded too hard where the going was bad. The Sewalt driver lashed his own animals mercilessly. The road flattened off toward Middle Wells, three miles ahead.

"Now!" Jim Rowan said.

Old Bowers nodded. No other words were necessary. Flat grassland here. Old Bowers edged his team off to the right. Through the reins in his hands he asked for all his horses had in them, and they knew what he asked. The Sewalt stage lost ground. Old Bowers pulled up even, twenty yards off to the right. He drew ahead and began to cut in. The Sewalt driver lost his head, veered off to the left from the road. Old Bowers crossed, still neck to neck, both on the open grassland. The Sewalt man sensed what was coming, yanked furiously on the reins. It threw his team into confusion.

He whirled on the box, whip raised. Too late. Old Bowers' hub grazed his right wheel . . . and Jim Rowan leaped. The descending lash cut over him He landed on the Sewalt box, grabbed and caught hold with one arm.

The driver tried to shift whip end for end in his hand and use the butt for a club. Rowan's fist smashed him in the face. The man dropped his reins. Half on the seat, half off, he drove a boot at Rowan.

Rowan came down on knees atop him, one hand hanging to the back edge of the seat, slamming his other fist into the driver's open mouth.

The stage rocked. Rowan grunted, pounded, slugging the other man. He pulled the driver's sagging head upright by the collar, words thick between his teeth: "Don't ever try it again...Don't ever let me catch you...whip a horse in the face. One of mine...or your own. That plain?"

Old Bowers had moved in ahead, turning his team in a wide circle on the level grassland. The horses slowed. Reins got underhoof.

The tired team was ready to quit anyhow without the whip. Rowan dropped to the ground, leaving the Sewalt driver spitting blood, sprawled, stunned on the box. He climbed up beside old Bowers once more, not looking back.

"All right. Let's get on into town," he said.

Early morning, bright sunlight streaming across the land. Seven o'clock by Bowers' old worn silver watch when they jolted over tracks, turning toward the town's new railway station.

The morning train from Middle Wells with which the night stage connected left at seven-thirty. Time to spare.

"Fifty dollars," said the mining man named Loomis, stepping out on the station platform. "Look here, I wouldn't have missed that scrap for a hundred."

"Paid your stagefare, didn't you?" Rowan asked.

"Yeah, sure. I mean—"

"This stage beats the Sewalt outfit every time it can. No extra price," Rowan said, walking away.

It was a block over to the hotel where Big Dan lived.

II

HE'D climbed these steps more times than he could remember since that day when he'd first met Big Dan Kincade, three years ago. Jim Rowan had been teaming on the Randsville road at the time, contracting cuts and fills with three scraper outfits and a feed wagon. Nobody had ever heard of him, but Big Dan Kincade had located the strike claim in the Randsville hills. Big Dan had cut a swath a mile wide across this country. He'd taken $150,000 from the strike hole before the vein began to peter out. He sold what was left for pocket money.

That was the biggest mistake Big Dan ever made in his life. The big lode opened up below; all Kincade had ever seen of it was just the upper displaced rock. He grinned and put his money back in other claims. All worthless. Big Dan was a plunger—free-handed, good for a loan to any friend so long as he had a dollar. Money meant little to him. The fun of making it was what he liked, and the fun of spending it. Everybody knew Big Dan Kincade, and he was everybody's friend.

He'd been stopped there on the road, that day, while Rowan's teams dragged fresh earth into a fill. "Your stock?" he asked Jim Rowan.

"Yeah. Horses ain't worth much unless a man works 'em himself. That way he can get ahead a little."

"Pretty soon this road job will be finished."

Rowan nodded. "I know. But there's talk of a railroad to Middle Wells. Be more work there if it goes through."

"Teams hauling on this road could make some money," Big Dan said. "Randsville is on the boom."

"It would take more cash for equipment to make a start than I can raise."

Big Dan, who'd opened up the strike claim at Randsville and missed the big lode below, grinned ruefully. "Me, too. But maybe we could swing it together. How many teams you own?"

"Just the stock you see working here."

They'd talked for an hour, and parted. "Well, stop in and see me first time you're in town," Big Dan said. "I'll scout around a bit meanwhile."

So that was the first time, when he came

to town, that Rowan had climbed this stairway to Big Dan's two front rooms in the hotel. The two most expensive rooms in the house, one fitted out as an office. That was the way Big Dan lived, so long as he had a dollar. The office room was blue with cigar smoke.

"Hello, Jim," Big Dan greeted him. "Come on in. Meet Talt Sewalt, friend of mine. Have a chair, sit down. We're all fixed up, Jim."

Rowan shook Talt Sewalt's hand. "How's that?" he asked.

Big Dan laughed. "Sewalt knows where we can get that equipment, Jim. Two good stages, a couple freight outfits. Rented stuff, of course—but no time to waste. We'll need more stock and Sewalt has some he'll sell on time. We got to have a wagonyard and freight depot here in town. So I bought an option on the old Haskell barn. It'll have to serve for a while. We'll put our first stage over the road Monday of next week. I've promised that. There's a boiler one of the mining companies needs delivered also. Right away. Can you handle it?"

Rowan pulled a deep breath into his lungs, to clear his head. "I sure can try," he said.

"Bring them teams of yours into town right away," Big Dan continued. "Use your feed wagon on the road. Before long we'll have to have feed corrals and way-station on the route, but till then your feed wagon will have to do. If you know three-four good long-line drivers, hire 'em. Maybe some of the teamsters on your scrapers will do. You take charge of that end, Jim. You get our freight wagons and stages through. I'll go after the business and handle the rest of it."

"You got yourself a slave driver for a partner, Rowan," Sewalt joked.

Jim Rowan, who'd climbed those stairs with a fear in him that Big Dan Kincade had forgotten the whole idea, shook his head and grinned. "Hard work an' me are friends," he said.

Talt Sewalt was a blocky, well-dressed man in his early thirties, muscular and good-looking in a blond, heavy way. He had the genial manners of a good promoter. His face was smooth and a little too fleshy, but there was nothing soft about him. His eyes were hard as small bits of glass under thick, drowsy lids, and Rowan noticed that they missed nothing.

The horses that Big Dan purchased from Sewalt on time turned out to cost half again what they were worth. The "good" rented stages proved to need a lot of repair, and most of the harness was rotten. But they needed it, and more. Big Dan had been right about the boom at Randsville. They needed more freight outfits, more stock. Big Dan sent laborers and lumber out to Cholla Ford to build corrals and the stagehouse there; and moved the crew on to Hatchet Springs when that job was done. The old Haskell barn in town was torn down, and half a block on the side street turned into wagonyards.

All this took cash. For the most part, they were still using rented road equipment, renting more stock.

"What we need is new equipment on the road," Big Dan said. "When we're able, we'll buy it—the best."

Something had to wait. That was the way Sewalt also had it figured; that was what he counted on. The joker was in Kincade-Rowan's lease on the rented equipment. If that road equipment — wagons, stages and what stock they hired—changed ownership, the lease was cancelled. Quietly Sewalt made his move and bought title to it with backing from inside the town. He still drifted around often to talk with Big Dan, genial, affable as usual. But when he was ready, Sewalt moved fast.

Kincade-Rowan had built up this business from nothing. Sewalt intended to break them with that first blow. From the end of one week to the first of the next, they saw their stages, most of the freighters, more than half of the wagon stock move over into Sewalt's hands. The same stages under Sewalt's name went back on the road with hardly a break in scredule, the same freight wagons and long teams. Then Sewalt offered to buy the Kincade-Rowan relay stations, corrals and the empty wagonyard on his own terms. That was his mistake.

Big Dan threw him down the stairs. They still owned a few horses, two old freight wagons that were put back on the road. Somehow Big Dan raised credit. More rented stock and stages—and the fight between Kincade-Rowan and Sewalt was on. And then other things began to

happen. The bearings of expensive mine machinery that Kincade-Rowan hauled were splashed with acid. A teamster and swamper, recently hired, cut loose a Kincade-Rowan load on the grade beyond Twelve Mile. A stack of good oat hay at the Hatchet Springs station caught fire.

The railroad, reaching Middle Wells, gradually put the old Colebaugh stage line to the east out of business, but brought in more freight than ever for Kincade-Rowan or Sewalt to haul and added more passengers to their stages. Big Dan borrowed to the limit. The old Colebaugh line—horses, harness, stages, tools, chains, freight wagons, repair parts and yard gear, all the accumulation of a first-rate road outfit—was coming up for auction sale in town. Big Dan scraped Kincade-Rowan to the bone after cash, because this was their chance to climb on top...

THESE were the things in Jim Rowan's mind as he climbed the stairs to Big Dan's rooms. When he entered the familiar room the face of a girl sitting by the window told him that Dan must be worse than he'd allowed himself to believe on that bitter ride from Cholla Ford to town.

She was a slim, tallish girl. Brown eyes, chestnut hair. Her eyes were sleepless and strained. She got up swiftly from her chair and came across the room into his arms. He felt the trembling in her body.

"Cathy," he said.

She thought as much of Big Dan as Jim Rowan did himself, or as did her father who'd known Dan Kincade since boyhood. It was through Big Dan that Rowan had first met Cathy Donnel three years ago. She'd been eighteen at the time, and the belle of the town. Jim Rowan was a raw, sunburned teamster down from the hills with no idea what to say to such a pretty girl. But Big Dan had fixed it up and he'd squired Cathy Donnel, the attorney's daughter, to the next dance here in the hotel. A lot had happened since then.

Her voice was choked. "He's been waiting for you," Cathy said. "Asking for you since it got daylight. In the other room, Jim."

That other door, left ajar, opened and Nate Donnel, Cathy's father, holding papers in his hand, gestured Rowan to enter. Big Dan lay there on the bed. A big man—two hundred forty pounds; six foot three in his boots—but not looking that way now. Big Dan had enjoyed life, every friendly, fighting moment of it. But even Jim Rowan realized no great amount of time was left, seeing that big, strong-boned face on the pillows with only pain left in the eyes. Big Dan worked hard to bring the old grin back.

"So we beat Sewalt's stage in again," he said. "Cathy's kept watch from the window." His voice was only a thin echo of the old powerful boom. "Keep it up, Jim."

Young Doc Thomas, sitting in a chair beside Big Dan on the other side of the bed, cautioned Rowan with his glance. Rowan said, "Sure thing—sure. Depend on that, Dan."

Nate Donnel sat down again with his papers and pen. "We'd better get on with this will, Dan," he said. "I'll read you what I've put down so far."

Rowan heard only part of it, fists clenched tight at his sides. Big Dan wanted money set aside for his older brother, but not for a while. Other things came first. He wanted Rowan to have complete control over the partnership for the next five years, to carry through the Sewalt fight to the end—win or lose.

"You'll do that, Jim?"

"I won't lose, Dan," Jim Rowan promised.

That ghost of his old grin moved Big Dan's lips again. "Then at that time my brother gets his share," he mumbled. "Put it down legal, Nate. And there's that palomino ridin' horse of mine which Cathy always admired. Want her to have him."

The attorney's pen scratched in the silence. Slant sunlight poured through the east front window. It was not hot in the room. It seemed Nate Donnel would never finish writing. Big Dan coughed and tried to raise himself on one elbow. He had something more to say.

He drew a rasping breath into his lungs, and muttered, "Jim—" His head fell back on the pillow, Doc Thomas bending over him. Nate Donnel finished with the will. Doc Thomas looked up then, hands falling slack.

"Too late. He's gone," Thomas said.

"God knows how he ever lived this long, the way that bullet hit him."

Rowan heard Doc Thomas' words a long way off. He was thinking now of Big Dan standing in the sunlight that day up on the road when they'd first met. Thinking of all the trouble they'd faced together since that time and all the labor, knowing he'd never meet the like of Big Dan again. He heard Doc Thomas' words, but it took a while before he understood them.

"What bullet?" Rowan asked.

Donnel put a hand on his elbow. "It was an accident, Jim," Cathy's father said. "Don't get any other idea. The gun wasn't fired at Big Dan. The shot hit him by accident."

"Who fired it, I asked you?"

Doc Thomas shrugged. "What was his name—?"

"A gambler in the Varsouvienne," Donnel explained. "Name of Sim Tulane. He's been working there two-three months for Emmett Hands."

"Where's Tulane now?"

Donnel thrust his face close, voice sharp. "Get anything like that out of your head, Jim. I said the shot wasn't fired at Big Dan."

"I want to know how it happened."

Doc Thomas said, "Like this: I'd stopped in at the Varsouvienne last evening for a nightcap. I saw Big Dan come in. This gambler—Tulane—was over at a corner table. Poker layout. Across table from Tulane was a dry-land homesteader from up in the hills—man by the name of Joe Mott. Mott had been losing steadily to Tulane. He was armed and a little drunk. Mott pushed back suddenly from the table. He called Tulane a card-cheat and some other things and reached for his gun. Tulane was faster and fired first—"

"Tulane missed," Donnel put in. "His shot missed Mott and hit Big Dan at the bar."

"That's the way it happened," Doc Thomas confirmed. "We carried Big Dan into Hands' office. He wasn't conscious then. But later he asked to be brought over here. We sent a rider after you."

"Where's Tulane now?" Rowan repeated.

Donnel shook his head wearily. "Big Dan had fifty friends in the place," he said. "Tulane knew that and in the confusion slipped out and left. Ned Varden's deputy has been looking at him. But the shot wasn't fired at Big Dan. Joe Mott sobered up and quit town, too, before he could be stopped."

"What about the Coleman auction? That's today."

"No time to think of that, Jim."

Jim Rowan looked down at the bed, remembering. "It would be the wrong time to forget it," he said.

III

THE COLEBAUGH wagonyards were the best in town. The Colebaugh line had handled everything to the east and south before the railroad reached Middle Wells. Now it was through, and old Jake Colebaugh's son was selling out—quitting the business that had made his father rich—because fast stages and long-line freight teams—lugging a ton to the animal, mile after dusty mile—could not compete with steam and rails; and Jake Colebaugh's son had not much liking for the business anyhow.

Eight Concord coaches, the same as new or in the best of repair, newly washed, glistening in the morning sunlight, stood in a row at one side of the yards. Fourteen freight wagons, wheels tall as a man's head; trailers and feed wagons; two buckboards. Thirty sets of light harness; three times that much heavy harness with chain traces. Stacks of collars, road chains, load chains and binders; forges and anvils, blacksmith's tools by the boxfull. More than a hundred head of big-boned, sound freight horses and mules stood in the corrals or lined up at the hitch rails. Some sixty fast stage horses, clean-limbed, well-bred.

Big Dan had looked over all the equipment, studied every animal. He'd scraped the bottom of the barrel after every dollar owed Kincade-Rowan on the road, and finally borrowed more. Rowan knew Nate Donnel had put in $4000 that he could not afford to lose. The Rands Mining Company had advanced a thousand. And Big Dan, the plunger, had felt lucky night before last. In Emmett Hands' Varsouvienne he'd risked a hundred on the wheel, and walked out an hour later with twenty-five hundred cash to swell the total.

Borrowing, gambling, scraping every

cent of spare cash from the business, forgetting all about their debts, Big Dan had raised nearly $11,000 for the Colebaugh auction—this less than eight months after Sewalt's attempt to break them and the start of his rival line.

Rowan stopped by their own yard and got Charlie Orcutt to come along. Charlie was a wizened, bow-legged man with a mouthful of tobacco-stained gold teeth and a seamed face. He was a top-notch freight and yard man, an expert judge of horses, and had held a hundred better jobs than anything Kincade-Rowan had to offer. But Charlie Orcutt hit the bottle; that was what was wrong with him. He smelled of whisky now.

"Hell, Jim," he mumbled. "What's the use? Big Dan held things together—you know that as well as me. Now it's finished."

"Not yet. What about this Sim Tulane?" Rowan asked.

"You mean was it the way things looked last night inside the Varsouvienne and Big Dan got hit by accident?"

"That's what I mean?"

"I don't do my drinkin' there. I didn't see it," Orcutt hedged. "A lot of others did."

"That wasn't what I asked you."

"I knew Sim Tulane elsewhere once—not here," he said. "He's a tinhorn cheat with cards. But no wild shot with a gun."

They turned into the Colebaugh yards. The auction of an outfit like the Colebaugh line had drawn in horsemen from two and three hundred miles away, stage-line owners, teamsters and sharp-eyed commission buyers. Dry land ranchers in need of a few work mules or horses, homesteaders and cowmen from the range were here, moving about the yards, looking, watching them. d
— wondering who'd be bidding against

"That all you know, Charlie?" Rowan asked.

"Well, once I seen Sim Tulane cut the ace from a card with his bullet at twenty yards," Orcutt recollected. "It was for a bet."

"I see. Now show me what Big Dan had picked out here."

"Them three coaches yonder." Orcutt pointed them out with an unsteady finger. "Four of the freighters—if they ain't bid up too high. Twenty stage horses. I've looked 'em over and know each by sight. Thirty head of heavy stock. Harness for the outfit. That's what Big Dan hoped to buy...I need a drink bad, Jim."

The bidding started on small lots of mixed equipment, to get the crowd warmed up. An hour dragged by. Two of the stagecoaches went to a small line owner from over Twin Peaks way. Andy McNair, a lank Scotsman who moved stages and freight south of the Sentinel run, cautiously bought ten head of horses. Then there was an interruption. The auctioneer left his stand for a conference with young Colebaugh and several other men. Rowan looked for Sewalt in the crowd. Sewalt wasn't there.

FOUR Concord coaches at the end of the line were rolled forward. Yard men marked three of the big freighters. Horses were led out. Big solid freight animals. Twenty-four head of lighter stock, and harness for the outfit. Back on his stand, the auctioneer explained that by request and because of a previous cash offer this stock and equipment was being offered in a block.

"Big Dan made no such previous offer," Orcutt growled. "Somebody else is after the same equipment."

"What do I hear?" the auctioneer bellowed. "Bear in mind, gentlemen, that the previous cash offer still stands. The owner reserves his right to withdraw this designated stock and equipment unless your bids top it...What do I hear? Gentlemen, speak up. Speak up! What do I hear?"

"Seventy-five hoondred," Andy McNair, the Scotsman, offered.

The auctioneer threw up his hands and turned away in disgust. But on the edge of the stand, he reconsidered and came back. "Gentlemen," he shouted, "that's ridiculous! You're wasting your own time as well as mine. Gentlemen—"

"Eight thousand," said the Twin Peaks man.

Charlie Orcutt put his lips back beside Rowan's ear. "Jim, it's as close as you could hope to come to gettin' what Big Dan wanted."

"Raise five hundred," said a commission man.

"Nine thousand," Rowan called.

He hadn't noticed Burt Sharpe till then.

Burt Sharpe worked for Emmett Hands. He was a long-legged ex-cowpuncher. He'd started work in the Varsouvienne as a bouncer and gone up from that till now he pretty much ran things for Emmett Hands in the gambling house. Sharpe stood idly on the edge of the crowd, leaning against the big wheel of a freight wagon.

"Nine, one hoondred," McNair said.

Sharpe caught Rowan's glance and looked away. "Nine-five," Sharpe called.

"Nine thousand, five hundred," the auctioneer confirmed the bid. "Gentlemen, gentlemen, you'll have to do better. The owner will be forced to withdraw this stock and equipment...What am I offered? What do I hear?"

"Ten," Rowan said.

"Ten thousand. Gentlemen, look at those stagecoaches alone. Four of them, as good as money could buy. Like new—"

"Ten and a half," Sharpe cut him off.

"I'm offered ten thousand, five hundred," the auctioneer continued, getting into the swing of it now. "Ten and a half. Ten, five hundred. What do I hear...hear ...hear?"

"Eleven," Rowan said, knowing he'd already reached his limit. This was as high as he dared go. Sharpe had never been in the stage-and-freight business. Hands ran a gambling house and saloon.

Orcutt plucked at his elbow. Rowan turned and saw Nate Donnel pushing through the crowd, shaking his head violently. Donnel shoved in close.

"Cancel your bid, Jim," Donnel said. "You can't do it! Where's the money coming from—?"

"Where?" Rowan said. "It's money Big Dan had yesterday, put aside for this purpose. Partnership funds for the most part. This was his plan."

"Big Dan's dead, that ties up everything." Donnel leaned closer. "I've just come from the bank. I don't know what he did with that money, Jim It wasn't banked. It wasn't found on Big Dan last night."

"Eleven and a quarter," the commission man called.

"And a half," Sharpe answered.

Rowan looked at Nate.

"What could have happened to that money?"

"Big Dan was careless," Cathy's father said. "He might have had it on him in a moneybelt. I don't know, Jim. But you might just as well cancel your next stage out. Don't contract any more freight. That's my advice."

"I can't take it, Nate."

"All right," Nate Donnel said. "You're half-owner of the business. But you can't touch partnership funds. You'll be responsible for the whole of any loss suffered to equipment you put on the road or any hauling deal you make before final settlement. We both know what Big Dan wanted, but he didn't live to sign his will. That's the way it stands."

The auctioneer's strident voice carried over the crowd: "Twelve thousand once. Twelve, twelve! Twelve thousand twice. ...Going...going...gone. Sold! What's the buyer's name?"

"Emmett Hands," Burt Sharpe said.

JIM ROWAN stepped up on the wooden gallery that extended across the front of the Varsouvienne. His boots had a kind of grating, measured tread. He walked inside. To his right was the bar along the full length of one side wall—the bar at which Big Dan had stood last night when a shot from among the tables had cut him down. The tables were on Rowan's left, filling most of the elaborate room, roulette wheels and the layouts covered with canvas till play began around noon.

A dozen idle townsmen stood at the bar. One barkeep was on duty up front. To the rear end of the mahogany bar with its long polished surface and fancy back-bar mirrors and trimmings, another barkeep was busy setting out bottles from cases—a paunchy, red-faced man. Rowan walked past the customers. He saw a pale-haired, brown-eyed girl in a short skirt sitting back there alone at a small table.

He said to the paunchy barkeep, "Where's Emmett Hands?"

The barkeep finished placing three bottles on top of a pyramid he was building on the back-bar shelf, and turned his ruddy face. "I'll see if he's in the office. What name?"

"Tell him Dan Kincade's partner."

A glint of interest showed in the barkeep's eyes. He moved back along the bar. Rowan keeping pace with him. The girl got up from the back table. As Rowan

passed she said in a low voice, "I'm sorry about Big Dan."

Rowan stopped. "Were you a friend of Big Dan's?" he asked.

"I'm Dora Mae, "she told him. She had a sort of faded prettiness. "Yes, Big Dan was a friend of mine in a way. He did something for me once. He had a lot of friends."

"He did. Some seem to have forgotten already."

"I haven't," Dora Mae said.

The barkeep had stopped in front of a plain, unmarked door past the end of the bar and held it part way open, talking to someone inside. Rowan stepped in beside him, back of one elbow against the door, and shoved.

The door flew from the barkeep's grasp. Rowan walked inside.

Emmett Hands sat in a leather-covered swivel chair behind a flat-topped desk. The elaborate carving of the back-bar and gilded fixtures of the big gambling room were lacking here. This room was plain, and the man behind the desk was plain. His gamblers and house men went in for showy clothing, fancy watch chains and diamond stickpins.

Hands did not. He had a broad, rather flat face, cold, intelligent eyes and a mouth that rarely smiled. He was as plain and efficient as a machine. His business was making money for Emmet Hands.

Hands' cool eyes studied Rowan. His curt nod caused the bartender to withdraw, closing the door behind him. In a comfortable chair across the desk from Hands sat Talt Sewalt. Rowan looked from one to the other, while his mouth got hard and thin across his face.

"So this is the way it stacks up?"

Sewalt's boots scraped the floor. Hands did not move.

Hands said, "What d'you want, Rowan?"

"When I came in here, I wasn't sure. I thought you might be settin' Burt Sharpe up in business. But I see different." He made a contemptuous gesture toward Sewalt. "It's been plain he had to have a money backer behind him somewhere. So it's been you from the start, Hands?"

"I've got money in the Sewalt stage and freight line, yes, It's a business proposition—no more, no less. What about it?"

Rowan nodded. "It explains a lot. You've come a long way in this town in a short while, Hands. When I first remember you, you were dealing in the old Arcade. Then you got a lease on the Varsouvienne here. You've come up fast. You've got a lot of influence along Gulch Street. I understand the new Paystreak saloon and gambling house in Randsville is yours. The town marshal up there once worked for you. I'll say for you, you've got ambition, Hands, and plenty of ability."

Hands said nothing.

"Which is what makes it all the more surprising when you tie up with a rat," Rowan added.

Sewalt jumped to his feet. Rage showed on his puffy face. He started towards Rowan, fists jerked up at his sides. Hands' cool glance stopped him. Hands made a motion to the door with his thumb.

"You come in here unasked, Rowan. Get out!" he snapped.

Rowan spread his boots a little on the floor. The door was behind him. He said, "Where is Sim Tulane?"

Hands looked away. Something changed—doubt, indecision, suspicion crossed his features for an instant. "Believe me, Rowan, I regret what happened here last night. I don't know where Sim Tulane is. I don't knowingly hire men at my tables who lose their heads as Tulane did. It's against my orders for any gambler to sit in a game while armed."

"Sim Tulane is known elsewhere as a crack shot."

Hands shook his head. "He came to me after a job two months ago. I gave him a tryout and he seemed all right. That's all I know."

"That sort of leaves it up to your partner, don't it?" Rowan asked, gazing steadily at Sewalt. "My idea is Tulane was hired to fire that shot. Some $11,000 that it seems likely Big Dan had on him last night is missin' this morning. But I doubt if Tulane himself had the chance to take it. There was nothing in the job for Tulane unless he was paid a killer's wages."

"Fifty men saw what happened," Sewalt yelled. "You got no proof of anything like that!"

"If I had proof," Rowan said softly, "I wouldn't be standing here like this, Talt. When I get proof I'll come for you. That's

my promise. Next time there won't be any warnin', Talt."

"There's the door. Get out!" Hands ordered.

Rowan turned to the door, opened it. He wheeled about in the doorway. "I had a partner I admired for the man he was," he said. "I don't envy you yours, Hands—that two-faced, smooth-mouthed sneak! Watch him or he'll drag you down with him before he's through."

HE closed the door behind him and walked away. The faded, pale-haired girl was standing at the end of the bar, still alone. One hand came from the folds of her short dress and she extended it quickly as Rowan went past. He stopped, half-turned; she thrust something into his pocket.

"Don't stop now," she whispered. "Don't let them see me talking to you."

He walked on. He was halfway across the gambling room when he heard the back-office door jerked open behind him. Rowan did not pause. His fingers felt the small folded slip of paper the girl had thrust into his pocket. As he stepped outside he pulled out the piece of paper and glanced at it. The note read:

Tulane is hiding at Sewalt's station on Cholla Creek.

Rowan rolled it into a wad, thrust it away. As he stepped to the street, Sewalt came from the door of the gambling house.

"Come back here!" Sewalt bawled.

Rowan whirled. It wasn't an invitation Sewalt needed to repeat. Sewalt stopped, braced himself—big head lowering on his thick shoulders. He was a solid man with a solid weight and bulk to him—not soft. He lanced out his left to meet Rowan's rush. Rowan's momentum slammed Sewalt back against the wall.

Men rushed from the bar into the doorway. Sewalt had thrown Rowan off; he circled, getting away from the wall. He shook his head from side to side, rumpled hair in his eyes. Rowan, twenty pounds lighter, came back at him slugging, ripping with his fists. This fight had been building up between them for almost eight months—day after day, mile after mile, while Kincade-Rowan and Sewalt freight wagons and stages fought another kind of battle on the road.

Men came running along the street, both ways, to gain a view of it. Word spread to the Colebaugh wagonyards, where the auction was still in progress. Sewalt had cut Rowan's cheek open. Blood ran down from it and smeared across his mouth. A lump swelled over one eye. Both men were breathing in hoarse, open-mouthed gasps. Sewalt was slowing. But there was power in his thick-muscled frame. His puffy face showed the battering he was taking. One eye was nearly closed. The front of his shirt had been torn open to the belt. His broad chest heaved.

The days, the weeks along the road had worn Rowan gaunt, but sinewy, tough as whang leather. He slipped on the boards underfoot. Sewalt jumped on him, trying to use his boots. Rowan dragged him down. They grappled, rolled. Sewalt gouged. They came up hanging to each other, staggering, slashing. Rowan's fist knocked Sewalt backward against the flimsy gallery rail.

The rail broke. Sewalt fell backward to the street. Saddled horses standing at the hitch rail strained against tie-ropes. One broke free. Rowan let Sewalt climb to his feet again, back against the hitch rail, and pinned him there. Dust from the frightened horses rose about them, dust from under their own feet. Sewalt couldn't get away.

Jim Rowan felt none of the punishment he took in turn. All that he saw was Sewalt's puffy face, welted red, one eye closing to a slit. All that he wanted was the sight of that face in front of him, seeing his fists strike into it and Sewalt's body. Sewalt's chin was down against his chest, covered up. The crowd swarmed in along the gallery. Rowan failed to realize Sewalt was no longer hitting him.

Somebody yelled, "Watch him—he's got a gun!"

Rowan saw the gun—a small, flat .32—jerked into view from Sewalt's hip pocket. His right fist crossed Sewalt's chest; his forearm chopped down on Sewalt's lifting wrist. The gun exploded into the dust with a sharp detonation. The crowd on the gallery's edge scattered. He'd caught the hand that held the gun now with his left. Rowan dug his shoulder in, turning, gripping the gun and hand that under Sewalt's armpit. He levered over, held it in both his own. His shoulder was

bearing down on that arm. The weapon dropped.

Sewalt strained for a lock with his free arm on Rowan's neck. Rowan doubled suddenly, bending at the waist, bunching his muscles into this. Sewalt's boots left the ground. A savage groan choked out of him as his heels hurtled up and he went over. Sewalt hit the ground on his back at the low edge of the gallery boards. He rolled over, arms hooked under him, and tried to get up. He couldn't make it

Rowan hung on to the hitch rail. The hurt of the blows he'd taken piled up in him now; his head pounded and his heaving lungs ached. He realized finally that Sewalt wasn't going to get up, and turned away on stumbling feet. He staggered from side to side along the edge of the street, while the crowd watched and remained silent.

IV

IN THE Kincade-Rowan office shack, Charlie Orcutt worked over Rowan with bandages, arnica and a tin wash basin. Charlie had a whisky bottle uncorked on a shelf. Every so often he'd turn and take a fresh pull at the bottle.

"What would keep you away from a bottle for a while, Charlie?" Rowan asked.

"What's the difference?" Orcutt mumbled. "A man don't need to keep sober to close up this yard, does he?"

Rowan thought it over, and finally said, "Then I guess you'll have to go, Charlie?"

It took a while for that to sink in. "Huh?" Charlie grunted. "What yuh mean by that? You missed out on the Colebaugh auction. I heard some of what Nate Donnel told you. Tomorrow they'll be creditors swarmin' all over the place."

"That's why there's got to be a sober man here in the yard—to keep freight movin' despite anything."

"Yeah?" Charlie Orcutt stumped over to the shelf, reached for the bottle. His hand dropped before he touched it. He turned around. "We got three old patched stages on the road. Freight wagons as bad or worse—most of it rented stuff. Not half enough horses. The only reason anybody rides a Kincade-Rowan stage is for the fun of watchin' us try to beat Sewalt into town. With Big Dan—if we'd only got that Colebaugh equipment and stock, there'd a-been a chance."

He came back and finished up his work on Rowan

"Okay," he growled. "We can't last out a week, so I'll go easy on the bottle. You got my word on that."

"That's all I want. Have somebody saddle me a horse, Charlie."

"You oughta go to bed It'll kill you to ride when you stiffen up after this"

"Have somebody saddle for me."

Rowan strapped on gun and holster. He'd done a lot of shooting, but never before had he packed a gun with intent to kill.

He climbed on a chunky sorrel and hit the road for Cholla Creek. But across the tracks on the edge of town, he knew he'd forgotten something that must be tended to before he left. He turned back.

The Nate Donnel residence was a two-story, spacious house set on a knoll that overlooked Middle Wells. It was one of the few houses in town that could boast a graveled drive, shade trees and a green, well-kept lawn. Jim Rowan could remember the first time he'd called here to see Cathy with Big Dan sponsoring him, impressed by the way Nate Donnel and his daughter lived. Impressed far more by Cathy herself, just returned from finishing school in the East. He'd been here many times since then, but always with a feeling of wonder that a girl like Cathy had promised to marry him.

He tied the sorrel to an iron hitch post in the drive, and as he turned to the steps Cathy came out on the porch. She looked at him and cried in a low, shocked voice, "Jim!"

He knew well enough what he looked like and tried to grin which only made it worse.

"Jim, what has happened?"

"Oh, just a little trouble. Where's your father, Cathy?"

"He'll be back soon. Jim, come in here immediately." She led him through the house to a small, sunny sitting room where they'd spent a good many happy hours together. "Now sit down there." Noticing the gun for the first time, she colored.

"Jim, is that necessary? Have things gone so far—?"

He said, "Yes."

NATE DONNEL came in at that moment. He'd been in town and knew what had happened there.

"Let's talk in my study, Jim," he said abruptly.

Rowan placed a hand over the girl's as he got up, and felt how cold her fingers were.

"This fist fight you've had with Sewalt doesn't help any, Jim," Donnel began.

"No," Rowan said. "I know that. But another thing that happened in Hand's place this morning throws a new light on what's already occurred."

He told Donnel about his talk with Emmett Hands.

"This strikes pretty deep, Nate. Hands has worked himself into a position of control over the gambling and saloon end of this town. Up in Randsville, it's about the same; he's got himself in on the ground floor. The town marshal up there used to be in his employ. Between the two towns is the road over which every mining tool, piece of machinery, sack of flour or case of bottled goods that reaches Randsville must pass. If Sewalt gets control of the road, with Hands behind him, Hands will tie both ends together and double his power. What will he do with it? How much does he want?"

"Hands is an opportunist. But he stays within the law," Donnel said. "There's nothing illegal in his backing Sewalt. Jim, take my advice. Big Dan is dead, the Kincade-Rowan line is finished. But a lot can still be salvaged from it—you can make a new start somewhere else."

Rowan turned away slowly. He'd known it would be like this. He respected Cathy's father who'd been Big Dan's lifelong friend. They felt the same kind of grief, but would never see things the same way. He said, "Well, I'll go along then. I've had a tip-off that Tulane can be found at Sewalt's station on Cholla Creek. I wanted you to know before I left town."

"That's a matter for Ned Varden's deputy to handle."

"No," Rowan said, "It's a matter for me to handle."

"Jim!" The attorney's voice was sharp. "Tulane is wanted, yes. But a lot of witnesses saw what happened. I've talked to a dozen this morning. They agree Big Dan was shot by accident. Don't you see where that puts you if you try to take law into your own hands?"

"That's not what I believe, Nate."

He pushed at the study door and went on out. Cathy waited in the other room. "I was just about to make a batch of cookies, Jim. The kind you like with chunks of chocolate in them. Come out and sit in the kitchen and keep me company for a while?"

"Not now, Cathy."

She made no other attempt to keep him. But on the porch, suddenly, she was close—clinging to him desperately for a moment. He held her that way with his bruised face down in her hair. She whispered, "Jim—oh, Jim!" and when her arms fell slack. This was like a last goodbye.

Rowan walked on to the drive and climbed on his horse.

AT THE first up-tilt of the mesa Rowan quit the Randsville road and veered off to the west. The mesa edge steepened above him, cut by numerous wedge-shaped draws. Brush grew along the base of the rim in thorny patches, and after four or five miles of this he located the mouth of the draw he was looking for. Old wagon tracks and the fresher hoof prints led him back around a bend. Fifteen or twenty acres of bottom ground had been roughly cleared here and scratched up with a plow.

A board and tar-paper shanty and a shed stood off at one side of the cleared patch. A bony milk cow with a bell on her neck shuffled away from the shed as he rode near. Rowan raised his voice in a hallo. No answer.

Rowan hadn't really expected to find Mott at home now. If what he suspected were true Mott, who had drawn the gun against Sim Tulane last night, would not be returning to him homestead to stay for some long time. He'd been paid to get out of the country for a while.

From this point it was closer to cross over into the lower course of Cholla Creek and follow up the canyon to Sewalt's relay station above. The sun dipped behind upper ridges while he worked along the canyon. But the best part of an hour of daylight remained when he came in sight of the Sewalt roadhouse. Across from him the wagon road swung southeastward up the long pull to Twelve Mile. Rowan hugged the opposite side of the canyon, mov-

ing on through the brush and tangled bottom growth till he had a plain view of the place from across creek. He dismounted from the sorrel and sat down to wait for dark.

The day stages, leaving Middle Wells that morning, had passed hours ago. Near the head of the long grade an out-bound freighter, traveling light, left a smear of dust against the sky. Spare horses stood at the feed rack or strayed about the Sewalt corral. There was no reason to think Tulane had been warned to move if he was hiding here. Or if he intended to leave, it wasn't likely he'd expose himself before nightfall.

Lamplight yellowed the windows of the stagehouse as dusk thickened. Smoke rose from a chimney in the rear, and a man came out and forked more hay into the feed rack just before night closed down. Rowan hoisted himself up painfully and closed in after that. He'd never been inside the Sewalt station and he studied the surroundings with close care. He crossed creek on the sorrel, and left the animal tied in a willow clump some fifty yards away.

There was no stir of activity about the place. As he watched the stagehouse, a single rider jogged across to the station and dismounted at the hitch rail. His back was turned and his mount partially hid the man as he walked over to the station's doorway. Rowan thought he recognized the rider's piebald horse.

Epp Worth, Ned Varden's deputy, owned such a horse. Rowan was twenty or thirty paces distant when Worth entered the place. This forced his hand, and he crossed that space of ground fast. Worth had turned and stepped over to a small bar in one corner of the room by the time Rowan came through the doorway. The deputy was a large, awkward man.

He wheeled around at the bar and put his attention on Rowan.

Behind the bar was a Sewalt man named Johnny Albee, who managed the way-station. Albee's halfbreed son, a chunky, beady-eyed youth, stood a few paces distant with his back and his hands flat against the wall. A third Sewalt man, just appearing, stopped in a back doorway across the room and leaned against the casement there. He was lean as a hawk, yellow-skinned and bony. This was Pete Fales who looked after Sewalt's wagonyard in town and was Talt Sewalt's right-hand man.

Fales said in a thin voice, "Well, well—howdy to both of you." His eyes, sunken under beetled brows, looked from Rowan to the deputy and back again at Rowan with a sort of wicked anticipation. "Come singly or together, gentlemen?"

"Alone," the deputy barked.

PETE FALES grinned crookedly. Rowan walked across to Deputy Worth at the bar. In that moment he was certain that Sim Tulane was in the room. In the opposite doorway Pete Fales made a stiff gesture with one hand. Behind him in the doorway the way-station hostler appeared holding a shotgun under one arm. Fales let the hostler take charge of that doorway.

"Something special, gentlemen?" Fales asked.

Fales sidled toward the other end of the room.

"Yes, something special," Rowan said. "Will you walk Sim Tulane out, Fales, or does he have to be taken the hard way?"

"If Tulane is here," Worth said, "I'm taking charge of him. That means he's under my protection from this minute till he reaches town to appear before a coroner's jury. Don't anybody make a mistake about that."

Rowan heard a horse nicker outside. Worth heard it too. He started toward the rear door. Fales' toothy grin grew stiff. He balanced forward from the hips, hand over gun.

"Stop where you are, Deputy," Fales ordered.

Rowan eyed a bottle on the bar. Together they might have put up enough show of strength to take Tulane without a battle. The deputy had thrown that chance away. The way they were placed now in the bright lamplight of this room, four guns against them the minute one was drawn, neither had much of a chance. Rowan grabbed for the bottle, hurled it with the sweep of his arm toward the lamp hanging from the ceiling.

Lamp and the bottle shattered. In that flash of a second before the lamp burst, he saw Albee bringing a gun up over top of the bar. He dropped. Fales fired through

fragments of glass. Rowan reckoned the most important thing was to halt Tulane. He shouted to Worth, "Go on—stop him!" and fired at the spot where the muzzle streak of Fales' shot had showed.

The darkness was not nearly so complete as Rowan had hoped for. The hurricane lantern outside still burned brightly, dimly illuminating the room. Fales began a quick, irregular shooting, searching for Rowan along the front of the bar. Albee yelled to protect himself in the confusion. The place reeked of kerosene and gunsmoke. The hostler's shotgun exploded, spraying a path across the floor. Rowan reached the wall. He supposed Worth had already got out.

Sound piled up inside the room with a roaring, deafening impact. The fitful hammering of Fales' weapon kept on adding its sharp voice to the racket. Rowan was shooting. The blast of Albee's gun tore past him—very close. But he'd forgotten all about Albee's halfbreed son over there against the wall till he rammed head on into the youth. Rowan brought the barrel of his gun down. The youth fell away from him.

Two shots left. Rowan had kept count. One shot now. He stumbled over a body laying there just inside the rear door. Epp Worth, he thought, should have reached the corrals by this time. Rowan dove through the doorway.

He dragged a gulp of cool, sweet night air into his lungs. Stopped. He leveled the last shot back through the doorway and ran on, reloading as he crossed dusty, hoof-pocked ground. Hooves started away from the corral toward the up-creek road. That meant Tulane was getting out. Behind, a gun began searching Rowan out in the darkness.

Rowan struck back across the stage station yards to his mount. In the light from the hurricane lantern out front he saw Albee legging across to head him off. He shot once at Albee, and that placed him for the other gunman. Albee jumped for cover, but the man behind now had Rowan outlined against the fringe of the front light.

Rowan cursed the lantern, realizing the odds were all against his ever reaching his animal. He veered toward the creek. He'd studied this ground carefully in the daylight. But the thing he hadn't counted on was the ricochet that clipped him as he stumbled over the creek bank. He went down hard.

V

ONE HAND ached with cold. He could hear a distant gurgling that gradually grew louder and louder. Rowan rolled his head and new pain stabbed at him. It seemed to him an hour or more passed before he could summon up enough strength to pull his numb, useless hand out of the cold water. He'd realized by this time that he was lying under the cut bank of the creek, fallen among the boulders and scrub brush at the edge of the water.

Moisture had soaked up through his clothing across his chest. He was shaking with cold. That was what had revived him. He propped himself up on one arm after a while, slowly worked his legs in under him and got his back braced against the creek bank. It was all coming back to him now, the fight in the stagehouse and Tulane's getaway. That brought him to his feet, but the stabbing throb in his head turned him dizzy. He fell again.

He could feel a ragged cut above his temple and figured out from that how close a bullet had come to stopping him for good. How long ago, he didn't know. He was still close to the stagehouse. The place was silent. It was certain they'd found his horse in the willow clump. But if much of a search had been made for him, it was easy to understand how a man could have passed within a few feet on the bank above and never noticed him, even if a lantern had been used. That was the one break he'd had tonight. He finally found his gun.

It was only a couple of miles up creek to the Kincade-Rowan relay station. All he had to do was follow the creek. The fact that Sim Tulane had gone out that way along the road spurred Rowan. But those were the longest two miles Jim Rowan had ever walked in his life. It was twelve-thirty when he staggered in there, still soaked and covered with mud and gore from the head wound.

"My God! What's happened to you, Jim?" Gene Castro, who managed the way-station, gasped, and yelled for his hostler who was catching a few hours sleep. "Come here, Ben!"

They worked the chill out of Rowan with hot coffee and brandy, and packed him into the same bed he'd left twenty-four hours ago.

"Wake me—daybreak," Rowan mumbled. "Without fail."

Gene Castro had never hated to wake a man more.

"Rowan, wake up," Castro said. "I got a feelin' something is wrong. Another rider just went past, poundin' the road for Randsville. That's the second since midnight."

The worst was getting dressed, pulling into his boots. After that Rowan began to limber up. Four hours of sleep was a lot for him. Jim Rowan had gone along for weeks at a time, dogging trouble on the road, with less each night. It had got so in the end that he could catch brief cat-naps while still in the saddle. He ate ravenously.

"Okay, Gene. Get me out a horse."

"Ain't got nothin' but a harness animal for you," Castro complained "Horse you left here last night is lame. It's been close to a week since Mike Guerney promised to send down replacement stock. Ain't seen hide of hair of 'em yet. Every animal in corral that's sound is plumb wore out. It's a bleedin' shame. The stage tonight went on to town with only a pair of leaders fresh in the team. Road stock—no horses can stand up under that sort of treatment."

"I know, I know. We'd counted on some Colebaugh horses. I'll see Mike Guerney again and explain. I'll drive the fresh stock down here myself if necessary . . ."

Eighteen miles from Middle Wells to Cholla Ford station. Twenty-six on from there to Hatchet Springs, the long haul—too long—but good going once the rim had been topped. The animal under Rowan was a striding, pounding trotter — no saddle horse. Jim Rowan pulled up a notch on his belt and took it.

He'd been gone from Cholla Ford about half an hour when men rode in there looking for him. Gene Castro heard what they had to say. He thought fast. Sure, Rowan had been there, he admitted; but had just left for Dry Basin, over east, where some horses were for sale.

"Ain't that right, Ben?"

"That's right," the hostler backed him up. "Some horses over Dry Basin way that Rowan wanted to see about. But why if it's so important ain't Sheriff Ned Varden ridin' along with you gentlemen?"

"Varden's up on Sawlog Creek—been gone two weeks. A huntin' trip," the spokesman for the riders explained. "Word ain't had time to reach him yet."

The party headed off for Dry Basin.

ROWAN headed up over the end of a ridge and passed the Sewalt relay station unobserved. When he rode in at Hatchet Springs he found an empty freight wagon stalled with a broken wheel.

"Hank Towney hauled my load on into Randsville," the skinner explained. "But couldn't find no spare wheel there."

"That's fine, ain't it?" Rowan said. "When we need every wagon on the road. Take one of them corral poles, skinner. Jack up your axle, put the pole underneath and chain up the small end to your wagonbed. It'll make a skid that will get you back to town empty where there is another wheel."

"Sure enough," the skinner said. "Never thought of that, Jim."

With a fresh horse under him, Jim reached Randsville by two o'clock in the afternoon. Jim Rowan sought out Mike Guerney at the livery stable. Guerney owned a horse ranch over Agua Tibia way, supplied his stable from it and rented out a good deal of stock besides. Mike Guerney also knew everything that happened in Randsville, or soon learned it from the idlers gossiping on smooth-worn benches in the stable's shady mouth.

Rowan found him at a battered, littered desk in the stable's tiny office, feet on that desk, tilted back in a sagged, homemade chair that threatened momentarily to give way under his weight, and about half asleep. Gurney looked at Rowan, opened his eyes. He pulled his heels down from the desk and sat up straight which was unusual and surprising.

"Now what th' hell, Jim?" he said.

"You've heard about Big Dan of course?"

"I've heard," Guerney answered.

"It's this way, Mike," Rowan went on. "We missed out on the Colebaugh auction. That means we got to have more stock from you. Half the time there ain't enough replacement animals at the way-stations to hook a fresh team into harness. It's as bad

as that, Mike. You promised a week ago to send more stock down to Cholla Ford."

"That was a week ago."

"Meaning?"

"Hell, man, don't you know when you're plumb beat? The best I can do for you now is the offer of a big black saddler out back that can outrun and outlast any other hoss in this country. He's a gift from me to you. Go climb on him fast."

Rowan stared at Guerney. "Is that your way of telling me Tulane is here with Emmett Hands' hand-picked marshal backin' him?"

"If it was only that—! Don't you know Deputy Epp Worth was killed in a fight at Sewalt's last night? Don't you even know you did it with four Sewalt men lookin' on to swear to it? You rode in there after Tulane, and Epp Worth aimed to protect him till after a coroner's jury had its say. That's the story that reached here around noon."

Rowan thought it over. He remembered that body he'd stumbled over just inside the rear door—Epp Worth's body. Epp Worth had not got out. He said, "So? I see. What else?"

"Epp Worth lived long enough to deputize Pete Fales in his place."

"Worth didn't have that power—not even if you believe the rest of it."

Guerney sighed. "Oh, yes, he did. Ned Varden had made Epp Worth acting sheriff in his absence—while he's away. Pete Fales can raise all the men he needs, and no doubt has already done just that. It puts whatever law there is square behind Fales and Sewalt—at least for what short time will be required to summon Sheriff Varden home. It's a certain thing Fales will try his best to get you before that."

Rowan said, "Where is Sim Tulane?"

"He's at the Cambrose Hotel. I saw him in the dining room this noon. No secret about it. He's got the marshal here behind him. He also has maybe three-four Sewalt teamsters and corral men to back him up if trouble starts. You got nobody, Jim."

"No?" Rowan said. "Once Big Dan counted you his friend."

He turned away. His bootheels raised a hollow sound across the plank boards of the stable's mouth. He walked down the steep slant of the street to the gulch below. He turned there at the corner and climbed again for a short fifty yards. This town was all up and down, clinging to the slope of the hill. He came abreast Jayser's tool and assay shop. He knew Clint Jayser well, having hauled in every board that built the place.

He put his head inside, and said, "Close up for a while, will you, Clint?"

He saw the gleam of Jayser's spectacles back in the dim interior of the shop. No reply. There was a wooden awning overhead, held up by posts at the street's edge. He moved across to a corner post, watching everything that moved in range of his vision now, and tilted one shoulder against the post. After a moment he heard Jayser's door close behind.

ACROSS street was the Cambrose Hotel—a frame structure two stories tall at the low end, half that high at the other. The entrance was on the street at the low end; halfway along the front wooden stairs climbed to the higher level and a door to the top floor of the hotel. To the left was an open space, mounded up from the dump of a mine. Back of the building was the hill and nothing could move in or out the Cambrose Hotel without his knowledge.

The edge of the awning overhead kept the sun from his eyes. His gun hung a little forward of his hip. He pulled tobacco and papers from pocket and built a cigarette. He'd been noticed before this. A small group of men gathered outside Emmett Hands' new gambling house and saloon here—down across street at the corner—and looked his way.

A burly, high-shouldered man left the crowd at the Paystreak Saloon and crossed the street. The gun at his hip had pearl handle-plates. The man had a flaxen mustache that drooped into points at the corners of his mouth. He wore a shiny badge on one wing of his buckskin vest. He'd once worked for Emmett Hands as bartender, and his name was Harry Murch. He was town marshal here.

He came into the shade of the wooden awning, about ten feet from Rowan, and stopped. He had a fine, deep-toned voice. "All right, Jim," he said. "Reach down and unbuckle your gunbelt. Drop it."

The point of Rowan's tilted shoulder moved slightly; nothing else. "Got a warrant, Marshal?"

"What's that?" The marshal set his boots solidly under him; he raised stiff fingers over his gun. "Don't need any warrant."

"Think it over," Rowan said. "What sort of evidence have you got to back an arrest? The story some wild-eyed rider brought you a while back? It ain't enough. That man was a liar, and I say so. I'll stand by that."

"He brought me orders from Pete Fales."

"Been takin' your orders from Fales long? Get this and get it straight, Marshal. You're not takin' me in on any such charge. You'll find yourself in a gun-fight if you try it."

Sixty long seconds passed. Murch's fixed gaze wavered. "I got plenty help right down this hill," he muttered. "Aplenty to take you any way you ask for it."

"Turn around, Marshal," Rowan ordered. "Start down that hill. This is between Sim Tulane and me—if he has pride enough to force him out to face me, or if he hasn't—and none of your business. March!"

A sudden racket came from across the street. Mike Guerney's head and brawny shoulders came into view over the rooftop of the hotel. He'd used a trash barrel in the rear to reach the low hill corner of the roof. Mike Guerney clambered up and sat astride the roofpeak now. A rifle was in his large lazy hands. He sat there in plain view all up and down the street where he could see everybody and in turn could be seen, and no one needed to ask what his purpose was.

Marshal Harry Murch walked stiffly down the hill. The group outside the Paystreak parleyed briefly with him. The clerk from inside the Cambrose Hotel stepped cautiously from the lower entrance, looked at Rowan and downhill at the crowd. He raised both arms overhead, and behind him a woman's bonnet showed. Two dance hall girls came out, scurried away down the street and disappeared. The clerk dropped his arms.

"Tell Sim Tulane," Rowan called across to him, "that I'll come in and hunt him down from room to room like a dog if necessary. He has five minutes."

The clerk went back inside. The moments passed, long as eternity. The sun, hot and still high in the sky, poured down its hard glare. Mike Guerney, astride the roofpeak, was something carved or made of stone—motionless with rifle in his hands. Nothing moved. There was an utter silence.

"Tulane!" Rowan called across to the hotel.

He headed toward the lower entrance of the hotel.

A door on the upper landing was jerked wide. Tulane fired. The crash of his shot and Rowan's came together in that hushed, waiting silence. Sim Tulane took one step outside. Rowan shot again. Tulane staggered and fell down the stairs, heels over head—twice over—limp as a half-filled sack of meal.

The clatter reached Mike Guerney's ears above.

"I don't know what's in this for me," Mike complained. "But you'll get the harness stock you need. Start movin' now—move fast! Take the black. You hear me, Jim?"

"I hear you, Mike," he said. "I'm goin'."

VI

CHARLIE ORCUTT, cold sober, drove his buggy across town in the cold morning before sunup.

A stooped, rawbone man sat beside him. Charlie noticed the way the man's red, bony wrists stuck out from his too-short shirt sleeves and the thin, patched jumper he wore.

"Got a family, have you?" Charlie asked.

"Uh-huh," the man said. "A wife and one kid. Been tryin' somehow to raise enough money to send for 'em. Y'see, I needed the hundred bad."

Charlie Orcutt turned the span into Nate Donnel's driveway and stopped by the iron hitch post. "You wait here," he told the man. "I got some things to talk over with Nate."

"Ain't located Sheriff New Varden yet, huh?"

"Not yet," Orcutt growled.

Cathy let him in. She was cooking breakfast in the kitchen Her father sat at the table. Donnel looked up, said sharply, "What about Sheriff Varden?"

"Not a thing," Orcutt muttered. "He'd gone up there to Sawlog Creek with Bill

Clark. Bill had to come home on business day before yesterday. But Ned had sighted a bighorn ram up among the peaks that he had his heart set on, and decided to stay on alone a day or two longer. Bill says the camp up there looks just like when he left it. The sheriff's packmule, grub, blankets, everything — even the sheriff's rifle — is there, but Ned Varden and his ridin' hoss are gone. Bill says that rifle left in camp shows plain that Varden didn't meet with no accident huntin' up among the peaks alone."

Nate Donnel clenched his hands into fists. "What could have happened to him? There never was a time the sheriff was needed here on the job more—and he can't be found. He left Worth as acting sheriff while he took this hunt. And however Epp Worth died, I can't believe he ever passed over his responsibility and star to Pete Fales. But Varden is the only man who can stop Fales now and halt what is happening in this town without bringing on a pitched gun-battle."

"I know," Orcutt grunted. "Outside I got Joe Mott with him."

"What?"

"Uh-huh. Mott walked in at the yard about an hour ago. He's a scared man. Don't know which way to turn. Sim Tulane paid him a hundred dollars for that gun trick, so Mott states—"

"Bring him in here!"

Orcutt went out and brought in the stooped, hawboned homesteader. "Now you just tell Mr. Donnel what you told me, Mott," he said.

Joe Mott was uneasy under Donnel's hard stare and the girl's eyes. He kept shifting his weight from one foot to the other, working a shapeless old hat around in his hands. "Well, Tulane come to me that afternoon," he said. "Before that I'd tried to borrow from him, so he knew I needed money. Tulane said this was just for a joke. I was to sit in on his game that evenin'—he give me twenty dollars for that. But he wanted it to look real, he said. When I lost part of the money, I was supposed to act mad, start cussin' the cards an' such. Then when he give me the signal, I was to stand just like I did and draw a gun. He wanted to scare the pants off a friend of his." . . . Mott remembered the girl. "'Scuse me, ma'am."

"It was your own gun you drew?" Nate Donnel snapped

"No, sir. I don't own none. So he loaned me one. I never had no idea—" The homesteader shook his head. He swallowed a couple of times. "No idea—not even after his shot cut past me an' hit Big Dan. I thought his joke had gone all wrong and I was scared. It didn't come to me till later —a long while later, sittin' out in the brush alone—that what had happened was plain murder. Big Dan always came in for a drink each evenin'. That was the plan. Tulane paid me a hundred dollars" Mott reached into his pocket and put the money on the table. "I don't want none of it."

Nate Donnel stared at the crumpled handful of bills. After a while, he said, "I see. You'll have to swear to this, Mott. You'll have to go before a court and tell your story again, and stand up under questioning"

"I'll do that. That's why I come in, it's what I want to do."

The attorney moved decisively. "Now Tulane must be found and we'll have a case that will split this whole thing open. Tulane himself was hired. He had no grudge against Big Dan personally. No reason of his own—"

"Tulane," Charlie Orcutt said, "was shot to death yesterday in a gun-fight at Randsville."

No one spoke for a moment. Donnel sat down. Orcutt, from the corners of his eyes, could see the girl's white, strained face, lips parted A white hand stole up slowly to her throat; and Charlie Orcutt wanted to hit somebody, to get into a fight —to get rip-roaring drunk—because there was no other way to express his feelings. He watched Cathy turn to the kitchen window, looking off toward the hills.

"Rowan fought him?" Donnel asked at last.

"Yes. Word reached town by messenger just past midnight. Fales left before daybreak with thirty men in a posse,"

Early sunlight filled the window where Cathy stood. But it was no use looking off toward the hills there and the mesa rim. Jim Rowan would not be coming back along that road to town now. She made a little motion with her head to Orcutt.

"There's dust on the road—the stages. They're reached the railroad crossing," she

said. "Can you tell which is ahead at this distance?"

Orcutt squinted his eyes. "Yes I can tell. It's the Kincade-Rowan stage ahead. Old Bowers on the box again this mornin'."

JIM ROWAN reached Hatchet Springs in the night and gave his orders there. He'd always been aware that this was a fight to the finish—and now it was plain to anybody that the end couldn't be far off. Guerney had promised more stock and he wanted the man at Hatchet Springs to carry word to Gene Castro at Cholla Ford. Castro's hostler Ben could handle the job. What they needed was a small corral hidden out in the brush somewhere halfway between Hatchet Springs and Cholla Ford —to split the long haul in the middle.

"Get the idea? Ben keeps a dozen-fifteen horses there," Rowan said. "Ben meets the night stage with a fresh hook-up on the road when it comes through, the same with the day stage on the way back. Might be quite a while before Sewalt learns how it is done. We got the stages left to fight with."

He took blankets and the black horse and bedded down out in the brush. He got three hours sleep before hooves were heard on the road, and a boy was hurried out from the way-station to wake him. Jim Rowan knew he had to keep on the move. Dawn found him jogging over into Dry Basin, planning to hole up with an old prospector named Sam Hawes — good friend of Big Dan's—till he could see how things were developing. But this was a bad break all around.

Rowan had no knowledge of the men Gene Castro had sent over here only yesterday. They were still around. Still halfway believing Castro's cooked-up story, still looking for him. Two of the party sat on the doorstep of Sam Hawes' rock and log shanty, listening to the old prospector muttering and swearing at them from within. One of the two looked up startled, grabbed for his gun.

"There he is!" he yelled.

Rowan had time to wheel the black around, time to duck back into the gully he'd just ridden from. The two men needed time to mount. Their shots were long, and the black still had lots of bottom, lots of speed left in him. There was not much immediate danger. The thing that nagged at Rowan was a fear that he'd get turned across into the roughs—the Devil's Patch. He lined out to the south. Half an hour later dust showed up dead ahead, the moving dots of horsemen under it.

That was the rest of the party which yesterday had come over to Dry Basin, hoping to find him. They turned him over into the roughs, two hours later, despite anything Rowan could do. There were nine men in the party. Two rode after help. The black under Rowan had come forty-some miles from Randsville, with only three hours rest, when the chase started. The black was a gaunt, long-legged, hammer-headed beast with the smooth, springy gait of a cat, who'd kick the daylights out of a man if given a chance or die under him if that was asked. Rowan saved the animal all he could.

He knew this was going to be bad. Not now—not yet. There in the roughs, the Devil's Patch, he easily lost his pursuers for a time. They no longer pressed him; they had him where they wanted him and waited for help. Why not? This strip was just one stony, blind canyon after another, saw-toothed with impassable ridges, split by massive tip-tilted slabs of rock and treacherous ledges—miles of it, but no way to cross—all sprinkled over with cat's claw and cactus, so a man who'd been there knew what hell was like. Seven riflemen on ridges were plenty to keep him bottled up in there. Plenty to starve him out and get him, too, if there was no hurry. But there was. So they'd sent for help.

By daylight it was only hopeless. By night it was much worse. From up on the tip of a ridge—blocked by a twenty-foot cliff beyond—Rowan could look back in the evening and see the big blaze they'd built to guide reinforcements to the scene. He was close enough to see dark, tiny figures against the firelight. He'd ridden up one blind canyon, down another, scrambled over ridges, prying, searching for any sort of way across, and hadn't yet got anywhere. Now he had to start all over again.

The night wind through the high rocks and fluted buttes had an eerie, wailing sound to it—like death. He knew he'd have to quit the black before daylight and try his luck afoot, but a wanted man could much better part with his gun than the horse under him in this broad land. The

black kept trying to turn off to the right.

"Well, go ahead," Rowan said. "Maybe you can do better than I have—couldn't do no worse."

He was weak with hunger, choked by thirst, desperately tired. He realized later that he must have fallen asleep for a moment. He awoke grabbing at the saddle, sliding with a stony clatter, and landed with an awful jolt. The black was still under him; they were down in some kind of a hole. One knee was full of cactus. He'd lost one rein. The black had his nose right down against the ground and took a slow, springy step, feeling his way. More cactus. Rocks that squeezed and scraped on either side, the black slipping, lunging . . . but half an hour later Jim Rowan knew the worst was behind,

He put a hand down on the black's sweaty, dust-caked neck and told him he was the best danged horse he'd ever straddled in his life. But that still seemed like a pretty weak way to express it.

WORD reached Middle Wells at dawn that Rowan was trapped in the Patch. Only a question of time now. The following day the message that Pete Fales sent to Sewalt was still hopeful. The third day somebody suggested that Rowan had sure as hell got away. The fourth day there was no message, but a number of riders and townsmen who had joined up with Fales for the excitement, returned with all enthusiasm gone.

Sheriff Varden was still missing. From his camp on Sawlog Creek, the sheriff had seemingly just stepped off into space with his saddle horse the evening Deputy Epp Worth had been killed or within twelve hours of that time, either way. A rumor spread around town now that Rowan could tell what had happened to the sheriff or where his body might be found. Emmett Hands put his weight and influence behind Fales and the Sewalt crowd as was to be expected.

On the other side were those who disputed the legality of Epp Worth's passing over his authority to Fales under any circumstance—and those who said he never had. From his own pocket Nate Donnel was hiring riders, led by Bill Clark, who continued the search for Sheriff Varden. That was the way Pete Fales found things when he arrived back in town on the fifth day.

"So you had him trapped in that hole, did you?" Talt Sewalt snarled. "And still Rowan got away from you."

"How he did it, I don't yet know," Fales said. "That's the plain truth, Talt. What's happened here?"

"Six days straight our night stage has been beat into town. Once by three-quarters of an hour. The same on the Randsville end. Every mornin' a crowd gathers here at the railroad station to watch for the stages. Yesterday I heard bets three-to-one offered against us. Rowan's back on the road, I think, and Hands has started riding me hard. We ain't got forever, y'know."

"There's some reasonable explanation. You questioned any Kincade-Rowan passengers lately?"

Sewalt's eyes narrowed; he puckered his lips. "Now that's a good idea. See what you can learn, Pete."

Eighteen hours later three Sewalt huskies climbed from a buckboard on the road midway between Cholla Ford and Hatchet Springs, and without much difficulty found the hidden corral. They caught the lone hostler off-guard, took turns slugging him till he fell and then used their boots on him. They demolished the corral and hazed the loose stock away, and after that drove back to town.

Rowan sighted the stray animals from a distance at sunup, learned what had happened an hour later. The hostler, Ben, was too bad beat up to look after himself, so Rowan rode to Hatchet Springs for help. Yesterday it had been a freighter caught out alone on the road with a load of flour which had been dumped, sacks split. There was nowhere he could turn. Pete Fales held the sheriff's office; Varden couldn't be found. Nobody on the Kincade-Rowan payroll had got any wages since the Saturday before Big Dan's death. More men couldn't be hired now.

Rowan himself couldn't linger anywhere; he had to keep continually on the move or remain hidden in the black hills. Even that couldn't last. Half a dozen riflemen, scattered out among the hills, could stop him or force him away from the road entirely as soon as Fales got around to it. He'd come a long way. He'd fought with

everything he had, and so had a lot of others—good men, loyal men, the best. But the best just wasn't good enough, and that was the truth he had to face. Sewalt had held the whiphand from the start, played each card too well. For Rowan those were the blackest, bitterest hours of all . . .

And in the wagonyard office shack at Middle Wells, Charlie Orcutt fought his old battle with the bottle and himself. Hay was needed at Cholla Ford, grain for the stock. Nate Donnel had handed Orcutt five hundred dollars—day before yesterday that was. Orcutt had possed out fifty here, a hundred there, to keep one creditor and another from attaching something in the yard. The five hundred was gone before nightfall. No money left for hay and grain badly needed at Cholla Ford.

Charlie had no savings of his own; better than anybody, he knew it was no use anyhow. His eyes strayed to the bottle on the shelf. In a week he hadn't touched it. He got up and stumped over to the shelf and, sure enough, there was actually dust on the bottle. He'd never seen that before. His hands started shaking with eagerness. All he'd ever promised Jim Rowan was that he'd go easy—that was all. But Orcutt knew himself too well.

The dust on the bottle was undisturbed when he turned away, and found a thin-faced, sharp-nosed man with high color in his cheeks standing in the open door of the shack behind him. This man said in a sharp, belligerent voice, "Where do I find Nate Donnel?"

"Lives across town," Orcutt snapped in the same tone. "How much money do you want, scavenger?"

"What did you call me?" yelled the other man. "I know what's been happening here. In another couple weeks nothing will be left. But I'll have a court order before morning closing this yard tight, holding every team and wagon that enters; and it will stay that way till Dan Kincade's estate has been settled and I get what's mine. Is that plain? I'm Dan Kincade's brother. Go find me Nate Donnel, tell him!"

CATHY DONNEL reached Cholla Ford station around ten o'clock that night. Gene Castro asked no questions. He knew who Cathy was and the fact that she had come alone impressed him. He had a good idea what her purpose was, and Castro could appreciate how much this pretty, brown-eyed girl must mean to Rowan.

"No, I don't exactly know where Jim is, Miss Donnel," Castro told her. "I talked with him a while, night before last. I'll try to get hold of him. Be best if you ain't seen here in the front room, though, if you don't mind."

He meant that her presence here, if known, might turn the stagehouse into a trap for Rowan. She followed him obediently into a back room. The room was small and square with rough board walls. Castro got a chair for her, and before he left hung a blanket over the window. On a bench there by the window lay a pair of buckskin gloves that she'd seen Rowan wear. The room was untidy and hadn't been swept out in a week. Blankets were heaped in a pile on the bunk; an old coat, chaps and odds and ends of riding gear hung on nails in the wall. But Jim Rowan had been here.

That was all that mattered to her. Castro had put up a lighted barn lantern out behind the place, and she knew that must be a signal. She sat there quietly, thinking over and over again what she must tell Jim, dreading it and afraid for him. But she knew she had to make him understand this and realize there was no other way. Midnight passed, and Castro brought in hot coffee for her.

"Don't know, ma'am," Castro said. "He'll come if he sees the signal—if he can. It's cloudin' up outside."

She was cold and wrapped one of the blankets around her. It was two o'clock . . . then three in the morning, and she began to despair. But sometime after that an owl hooted from the summits. Castro went outside, prowling about the stagehouse in the dark, returned and took down the lantern. Ten minutes later Rowan walked in.

He'd been gaunt to begin with. But this was different. His eyes were different, sunk back in his head, pale and watchful like an animal's. The cut of a bullet above one temple was far from healed, and the marks of that savage fight with Talt Sewalt could still be seen.

"Honey," he said, "you got no business out on this road. Particularly not in a Kincade-Rowan stage station. It's got pretty

bad lately, don't you know that?"

Behind them, Castro closed the door. Rowan held her away from him after a moment, filling his eyes with the sight of her with a sort of unremitted hunger. It was like striking him anew with her own hand to tell him what she had to say. But he heard her through without speaking, nodding his head a little from time to time; and she realized none of this came as a surprise to him and he already knew how thoroughly he was beaten. That, somehow, was the worst of all.

"So it's Big Dan's own brother who finally puts an end to Kincade-Rowan," he said when she had finished. "Won't he listen to reason?"

"No. Two men—brothers—couldn't be less alike," she said. "All that interests him is what money he can get from Big Dan's share of the business. Jim, there's only one thing left for you to do. You're no outlaw, but they'll make one of you. You've got to come in and give yourself up."

She watched his head lift in the silence and presently caught the sounds his ears had heard—the growing clatter of hooves and wheels on the road, striking the rocks of the ford now. The hooves and noise passed without pause and faded off in distance along the road. The Sewalt stage was ahead tonight.

"Give myself up to Fales?"

"Dad has a witness—the homesteader named Joe Mott," she told him. "Tulane hired him to start trouble that night so he could shoot Big Dan. There's proof of that. Fales has only seized temporary power and it can't last."

"No trace of Varden yet?"

"Dad's afraid he's met with foul play. Too much time has passed. But, Jim, don't you see—?"

She knew he was no longer listening to her. The hard, wary look was back in his eyes again, and a weary restlessness. Presently he left her and she heard him speak with Castro outside. She stood beside the door and waited for him, and five or ten minutes passed before he came back.

"What is it, Jim?"

"Our stage shouldn't be so far behind. Something's wrong. I'd better ride up along the road. . . . Stay here, Cathy."

He was gone. But she followed him out. Castro stood outside. She stopped beside the way-station man, and after a moment saw vague shadow leave the near edge of timber—a horse that was gaunt and sinewy-lean and more than half outlaw, like the man on his back—and watched them disappear. Castro did not move or speak, and it came to the girl that this was no different than any other night for him. This was the way they'd kept Kincade-Rowan going for so long.

Castro sighed heavily, finally. "There's the runnin' lights just come into view, ma'am. Up on the rim," he said.

They watched in silence while the lights winked, dipped down, disappeared, and came into view again. From far off, halfway down the rim wall now, they began to hear the distant run of hooves and noise of wheels on the road like a tiny echo. Gene Castro had turned away toward the corrals after the fresh spans already harnessed when those small sounds in the night changed. There was a banging up there on the road, a far sudden shouting, and then a distant clamorous, rending, smashing racket, accompanied by the screaming of a wounded animal, that it seemed would never stop . . .

Jim Rowan was much closer. This was all happening right up above him on the steep down-pitch of the slope. He heard the banging when the stage first left the road and old Bowers shouting, and the crash of the coach going over, rolling, bounding and breaking apart with the team still tangled in harness. The black by that time was lunging under him, humping it up ridge through the brush and over boulders. Then the smell of dust settling over what had happened up there reached his nostrils.

The screams of the dying horse were choked off. Higher up the slope a man was calling; another answered him.

No starlight through the overcast of clouds above. In the darkness Rowan stumbled on what was left of the coach. The dead horse—one of old Bowers' wheelers—lay here, still hooked in the traces. The men up above were working down toward him. He found one of the running lights still in socket, glass smashed, and wrenched it free. The flame of a match scorched his fingers before he had the wick burning. It gave a light of sorts. A man stumbled through the darkness nearby.

"How many passengers tonight?" Rowan asked.

"Just three of us. I hear the other two up above. We had warnin'—time to jump."

"The driver—?"

"Don't know. Seemed like somethin' broke sudden—back there on the steep stretch. Brakes wouldn't hold. We hit some boulders, and the driver started yellin' for us to jump. He went over with the coach, I guess."

By the smoky figure of the smashed running light Rowan held they found old Bowers lying part way up the slope, chest crushed when the stage turned over on him, the broken end of a rein still wrapped around one hand. Rowan remembered how old Bowers talked to his horses along those same reins. He turned back to the wreckage.

The reach under the coach had snapped when the strain of locked brakes was put on it, so the brakes couldn't hold. That much was plain enough, but only part of it. Sometime recently the reach had been sawed more than halfway through, smeared with axle grease and dust to conceal the cut till after a smash-up like this had occurred.

THE clouds overhead had lowered and a fine mist was falling over Middle Wells when Talt Sewalt rode into town before daybreak. The Varsouvienne was closed, but a night lamp burned inside and from around corner he saw a light in Hands' office in the rear. Sewalt put his horse up at his own wagonyard and then tramped back toward the gambling house with his wet slicker slapping against his legs.

His knock brought Burt Sharpe to the door. Sewalt had never had much liking for Sharpe. He said, "Up kind of late, ain't you, Burt? Boss still here?"

"Inside," Sharpe answered in his abrupt way.

The door of the big safe in the office stood open. Stacks of papers—invoices, bills, accounts and receipts—covered the flat top of Hands' desk. Hands glanced up as Sewalt came into the room with no change of expression, and went on sorting the papers he held.

"Month-end inventory?" Sewalt asked.

"No," Hands replied. He paused, wrote down figures in an account book. "Where have you been?"

Sewalt pushed his wet slicker back and got a cigar from an inside pocket. "Just checking up," he said with some satisfaction. "That homesteader, Joe Mott, seems to have cleared clean out of the country. I wasn't sure. Thought he might be hidin' out in the brush, comin' into his shack after nightfall to sleep and eat. So I sat down and waited, but no sign of him."

"No," Hands said. "Nate Donnel has him under cover where nothing can happen to Joe Mott till he's had a chance to speak his piece. He'll make a good witness."

Sewalt, lifting a flame to his cigar, dropped the match. *"What?"*

Hands picked up another stack of papers. "I never asked you any questions about that," he said. "I knew, of course, how it must have happened and that you'd hired Tulane to do the job. Accidents of that sort don't occur in a well-regulated gambling house unless arranged. But Tulane was one of my gamblers and that mixed me up in it deep enough without any actual knowledge of murder." He shook his head.

"Listen!" Sewalt cried hoarsely. "They can't tie a thing on me. My hand don't show. Tulane arranged the deal with Joe Mott and not me. Tulane is dead and can't talk. If I could've found Mott I'd have handed over another hundred, to avoid something like this. But it don't matter."

"No?" Hands rarely smiled and his lips had a thin, compressed look now. "Another thing does. Some couple of hours ago, just before the Varsouvienne closed, Sheriff Ned Varden arrived back in town. The sheriff is in pretty bad shape and has quite a story of his own to tell from all accounts. It seems two riders came into his camp on Sawlog Creek along towards morning — the same night Deputy Epp Worth was killed. They awoke the sheriff, ordered him on his horse and then proceeded up across the peaks with him. They holed up in an old mine tunnel over there somewhere and kept the sheriff under guard night and day. Varden finally walked into the Tanner ranch yesterday, having been missing about a week."

Sewalt lighted his cigar with a sort of defiance. "Well, what did you think had happened to Sheriff Varden? Think he got

lost huntin' sheep all by himself?"

"No," Hands answered. "I thought you'd been able to buy Varden off. I put money behind you—enough. I didn't ask questions or give you instructions. The idea was that you were to pinch out Kincade-Rowan by whatever means seem necessary and take over the Randsville road with your stages and freighters while I remained your silent partner. That offered advantages to both of us. I left the details up to you and gave you a free hand. That was my mistake."

"Varden couldn't be bought—not at any price," Sewalt said. "I did the best I could, and had to act fast that night. Varden don't know either of the men who took him captive and held him over there. It's news to me he got loose. But there's no tie-up. Both men will skip according to instructions and he'll never see either again."

Hands showed impatience. "The hell he won't! It took Varden a week to do it, but when he finally got his hands on a gun he knew how to use it. One of your two guards is dead. Varden brought the other back with him to the Tanner ranch at the point of the same gun. That man is going to talk to save his own skin if he can. Where does it leave you, Sewalt? Deputy Epp Worth was shot to death in your stage station. Likely one of your own men did it. Epp Worth never handed over authority to Fales—that was a cooked-up story from the start. It's only too plain now that Varden was spirited away to give Fales time to patch holes in his story and settle with Rowan. Even that last failed. Rowan's still at large."

"But the Kincade-Rowan line is done for," Sewalt said. "Put that on the credit side of your ledger. The rest ain't proved by a long shot. Don't think it ever will be."

HANDS' head bent over his papers. "There's just one thing I'm curious about," he murmured. "That night after Big Dan had fallen and was carried back here to the office—did you get his money-belt off him then?"

"He was in no shape to notice," Sewalt said. "Yes, it was an unexpected windfall."

"I see. The next day in here Rowan told me I'd tied to a man who would drag me down with him. That is right. I've had three lucky years in this town. But I've sat in too many games not to know when the luck has turned and how fast a stubborn man can ride a losing streak to the bottom."

Genuine concern showed on Sewalt's face for the first time. "You don't mean you're quitting, getting out, Emmett?"

"Sid Langley owns this building. He'd like to buy the games. I plan to be on the first train out of town this morning," Hands said coolly. "Sharpe will stay here to settle up for me and later manage the Randsville house. My plans are otherwise indefinite. I may locate in Sentinel."

Sewalt stared at him, his mouth working about the butt of the cigar that had gone cold again. "So you're yellow, huh?"

Sharpe, standing across the room, moved suddenly and warned in his short, abrupt voice, "Careful!"

But Hands showed no resentment and wasted no time. "I made a bad bet on you, Sewalt, and I'll take my loss. I know this town and what kind of fever grips it now, and what will happen if I'm fool enough to stay and let it rise. I won't. The signs are plain enough."

"I don't believe it."

"That's your concern—not mine. Sharpe will settle up between us. I'm busy now. Get out!"

The morning was turning gray outside through the mist and overcast above. Sewalt walked back to his own yard. He sat down in the warm office, mulling over everything Emmett Hands had said, discounting it. Nothing had happened yet. He sent the night hostler out to locate Pete Fales, and went over to an all-night restaurant at the railroad station for breakfast. Trainmen and a few early risers had already gathered there.

The talk was about Varden's disappearance and return. No one seemed to know anything very definite. He heard somebody suggest that maybe the sheriff had found it convenient and much safer to drop from sight for a while and let Pete Fales tend to a dirty job for him. A rumor like that could help. If the one guard Varden had brought back with him talked, it would be that man's word against Sewalt's anyhow. That wasn't enough. Talt Sewalt finished breakfast and went out.

The usual crowd was collecting on the

sheltered platform by this time, waiting for the stages to appear. The usual odds were being offered.

"I'll take a hundred of that money," Sewalt said.

No one was prepared to meet his offer immediately. A group got together and argued, and odds fell two-to-one. Sewalt could feel power behind him again and new confidence.

"Aw, hell! Make it even money," he jeered.

His hundred was covered in the end. The Sewalt stage rolled in on time—the other nowhere in sight. Sewalt laughed, pocketed his winnings and walked back to his wagonyard. The night hostler said Pete Fales was coming. Sewalt stood in his slicker in the office doorway, waiting for Fales. Like that, through the gray mist and half a block away, he saw a rider on a gaunt black horse cross the end of the street past the Varsouvienne—and immediately recognized the man.

His head came down, thrust forward. He stood there for a minute, considering this; then wheeled about in the doorway and tore his slicker off. He rubbed damp hands against his pants and pulled his gun from the holster and made sure that the cylinder was full. He dropped the gun back, his puffy face tightened. By all rules, all the odds, that man he'd just seen through the thin storm should long ago have been dead—long ago beaten, whipped to the ground and trampled under. Instead, he now rode into town.

THERE was a driving fury in him as he came out into the rain again, crossed the street and cut through between opposite buildings. He had no plan in mind at the moment, except to walk into the Kincade-Rowan yard and beat Rowan to the draw. But as he came out on the next street in the middle of the block, the sight of Pete Fales crossing the near corner gave him a new idea. He motioned with an arm to Fales, saw Fales turn and start toward him, and then gestured toward the Kincade-Rowan lot.

Fales understood, slowed his pace and unbuttoned the short windbreaker he wore. Sewalt cut in here beside a hardware store that was not yet open for business, following its wall till he reached the alley in the rear. He vaulted over a board fence from the alley side and stood amid the clutter in the back of the Kincade-Rowan yard, beside the freight shed. There were a good many horses idle in the corrals; and two big freight wagons, hauling in last night, stood out empty in the drizzle.

From the end of the freight shed, he looked up through the yard and saw Rowan's black horse by the office shack. Sewalt moved on in under cover of the shed and ducked under the nearer of the freight wagons. He walked slowly forward to the other and took his stand alongside it with a broad rear wheel as high as his head for partial cover and the thin rain slanting over him, less than twenty yards from the black horse.

Rowan had come from the office shack. He turned and said to Orcutt in the doorway, "Well, hire a hack from the livery stable here in town then, and take the coroner along with you. Castro will bring old Bowers' body in, but we can't leave three passengers stranded on the road at Cholla Ford."

Orcutt's reply was inaudible. Orcutt followed Rowan from the shack with a slouch hat tipped over his eyes against the rain and shoulders hunched under a leather jumper, unarmed. Fales came into view from the street at that moment. Rowan pivoted slightly, still not all the way around, but with his eyes set on Fales and no sign in him that he intended to give up. Fales still wore Deputy Epp Worth's star with his windbreaker open and the handle of his gun pulled around front. Fales searched through the rain and located Sewalt beside the big wheel of the freighter, and this was the way Sewalt wanted it.

Fales walked on his toes like a cat. "All right, Jim," Fales said. "I've got my orders to close the yard and you can start reaching anytime—it's that kind of an arrest! Keep out of it, Orcutt."

Orcutt froze. Two steps would get him back inside the door of the office shack. Orcutt whirled and leaped for it. The black horse wheeled part way around. Sewalt was throwing up his gun by this time, but it was Orcutt's move that Fales tried to stop. He fired from hip at Orcutt—with Sewalt's shot roaring into this. One leg collapsed under Orcutt. He hit the sill on his knees, but momentum carried him in

through the doorway.

The whirling of the black horse knocked Rowan's shot at Fales aside into the street beyond. But at once the black horse gave him cover of sorts against Sewalt on the other hand, and the blast of Sewalt's weapon was a wild, noisy warning in his brain. He caught the black horse by the bit and fired a second time at Fales, starting a sidewise retreat across the yard. The black reared away from him then under Sewalt's fire, and all this was happening at once. Fales had dropped in shelter of a water barrel at the corner of the office shack. Rowan turned toward Sewalt now, zigzagging as he ran, and Fales' gun hammered anew.

In the office shack Orcutt dragged himself up, clawing at the wall with his hands to reach a rifle. His straining fingers touched the stock; the rifle tilted on the pegs and fell. He sprawled and caught it.

Sewalt had fragments of lead, from a ricochet shot, in his arm. He dropped down under the freighter, shooting. He turned, getting to his feet, slipping on the wet ground, and stumbled back toward the freight shed with the wagon between him and Rowan. Rowan ran up alongside the freighter to get at him—and this gunfight in the Kincade-Rowan lot was not yet twenty seconds old. The rear of the wagon blocked out Fales' sight of Rowan. Fales wiped rain from his eyes and started forward, holding his gun raised.

As he came even with the door of the office shack movement within caught Fales' attention. He whirled and threw his gun around. The rifle in Orcutt's hands exploded, and Fales doubled over. Orcutt held the rifle steady against the door frame and fired again.

Sewalt had no time to notice this just then. He backed up against the front of the freight shed, pulling cartridges from belt with muddy fingers, and rammed two into cylinder. He could see Rowan's legs under the freighter, saw him pause. Rowan ducked down to locate him; briefly their eyes met through the rain and neither fired. Sewalt felt along the wall at his back for the sliding door into the shed. But it was locked and would not open, and then he saw Fales down in front of the office shack. Rowan had come up between the two wagons.

In that instant Sewalt knew uncertainty. He wheeled and started to run for cover at the back corner of the freight shed—and realized he couldn't make it. Rowan's voice stabbed at him. Rowan had stepped out between the two freight wagons in full view. Sewalt dug heels in and brought his gun up, the old hate and rage in him steadying his arm. He headed back at Rowan as he shot.

Sewalt felt the kick of the weapon in his hand, heard the sound of it slammed against eardrums. He thumbed the hammer back once more. But something was wrong. His knees had no strength under him; they bent and he swayed from side to side and collided with the wall. His gun dropped under him as he went down. He raised his face and his mouth worked. He was cursing Rowan as he fell.

VII

FOR THREE days no stage had moved along the Randsville road. Freight piled up at the railroad station, accumulated on the Sewalt lot and in the Kincade-Rowan shed, wherever it was consigned. There was no one to take over Sewalt's end. Fales, his right-hand man, had gone down with him; Hands had left. The town boiled over with the impact of this thing. Varden was back in the saddle, seeking evidence, building up his case from Joe Mott's weary, miserable story of the Tulane affair. Albee and his halfbreed son had fled, but the hostler in the fight at Sewalt's relay station that night thought Pete Fales' gun had actually cut down Deputy Epp Worth.

Burt Sharpe had closed doors of the Varsouvienne, and departed for Randsville. But in Randsville the confusion was worse. Travelers, drummers, miners, engineers—all kinds of people—were stalled there. Mike Guerney rented out the surrey, two top buggies and a buckboard he kept in his livery stable and many saddle horses. People drove, rode and walked the miles to Middle Wells; and others met them, bound the opposite way. Jim Rowan had one hired mud wagon on the road—just to show Kincade-Rowan was still in business, he said.

But after three days the inventory in the Kincade-Rowan yard was finished. It was all down in black and white, the figures

in neat rows, added up and verified. On the other hand were the debts. Nate Donnel had been in the yard early, and around half-past ten in the morning Cathy stopped by for Rowan in the Donnel rig and they drove over to the bank.

Rowan sat on the seat beside her. "Been in to see Charlie Orcutt this morning?" he asked.

"Just for a minute. He thinks he could get over to the yard with a pair of crutches. He has some kind of idea you can't get along without him—not even taking inventory."

"That's mighty near the truth."

"Jim, dad says it's bad—much worse than he realized. There's no trace of the money Big Dan had that night. Kincade-Rowan can't possibly meet its debts."

"I know," he said.

It was only three blocks over to the bank. Rowan got out and tied the horse at the curb rail and helped her from the buggy. "Coming in with me, Cathy?"

"Just as far as the hall."

They entered the bank building by the side door, and she sat here on a bench against the wall while he went on into George Huacker's back office. George Huacker ran the bank. Beside him sat Nate Donnel with papers spread out on the board table.

Across from Donnel were Big Dan's sharp-faced brother and the attorney he had hired. Old Judge Munnsinger sat aloof at the far end of the table, stroking his tobacco-stained beard.

"Well, there it is," Donnel said. "Kincade-Rowan isn't solvent—and wasn't at the time of Big Dan's death. There's your accounting to the last penny." He stared across at Big Dan's brother. "I know what Big Dan wanted. But that meant nothing to you, and this is the way you would have it. The red figures on the right are what Big Dan left you. Those are his share of the debts. Satisfied?"

Dan Kincade's brother shouted, "The name is worth something."

"To me it's worth more than you'll ever know," Rowan agreed.

Dan Kincade's brother and his attorney consulted. "Five thousand dollars," the attorney murmured tentatively.

"Done," Jim Rowan answered.

Nate Donnel got up from his chair with a shake of his head. Banker George Huacker sucked in his lips, and asked thinly between them, "Where is the money coming from, Rowan?"

"From you," Jim Rowan said. "I'll need another five thousand to clean up pressing debts right away. How much money in loans and otherwise has this bank got invested in Randsville mines and property? Between the two towns is the road. Stages and freighters have got to move over it to keep Randsville alive. Suppose some other outfit sees its chance to come in here now and hike freight rates fifty cents a hundred—or even ten. What would that mean to your investments on the other end? Do you want me to go outside after the money I need?"

"No security, nothing behind you," Huacker muttered.

"Nothing but the Kincade-Rowan name. Isn't that enough? Do I look like I'm ready to quit now?"

"Well, no—no, I see your point. I'll have to take it up with the board of directors."

Rowan stood at the door. "Fine. Stages and wagons have got to get back on that road today. It'll take a month to catch up on the freight piled in this town right now. I'll need more money to meet running expenses for the next thirty days. Explain that to your board of directors."

He went on out. Cathy stood close in the hall.

"Jim, what does that mean? What have you done?"

"Just told Banker Huacker what I need. He's a man who can understand the threat of outside money in this business."

"Did you get it?"

"I think so." He grinned, raised one arm and put his hand against the wall. He did the same with the other arm with her between them. "There's another thing I need right bad, too."

Her eyes looked down. "What's that?"

He said, "You. We've been engaged too many months, waiting for I don't know what. It's going to take I don't know how much longer for the Kincade-Rowan line to get on its feet and out of debt. But if you want a big home wedding I can maybe wait another week."

He held her and kissed her hard.

SHOOT THE MAN DOWN

By H. A. DeRosso

Arrogant Dan Morgan was rated the sweetest gun-guard ever to sit a high-topped Concord — 'til his head rode so high he failed to see the road.

HE WAS Dan Morgan, proud and efficient gun-guard for the Ferris Stage Lines — sitting tall and straight and quite a bit handsome up in the box with a double-barreled shotgun across his knees and a .30-30 at his feet and cedar-handled sixshooter at his right hip. Morgan looked down on the world with pride and arrogance from his seat high on the Concord.

His record was unblemished. Four years of riding gun-guard for John Ferris; two holdup attempts, both failures; three dead men; not one penny lost; not one passenger injured.

That was a record to be proud of and perhaps it did go a little to his head, but he never lost his equilibrium. It gave him assurance and the right to court John Ferris' daughter, Sue, and hope that some day she'd be his wife.

He stirred irritably on his seat, impatient to be off. John Ferris was giving some last minute instruction to round Felix Barker,

the driver. Morgan raised his glance to the door of the depot and frowned a little as Sue Ferris and Al Donahue came outside together.

The world suddenly didn't seem so good to Morgan. Al Donahue said something soft to Sue and she laughed merrily. His eyes followed Donahue's lithe form as he crossed over to his horse and mounted.

Al Donahue, too, worked for Ferris. In the office. But because of his striking personality he was often sent out to solicit freighting jobs. Morgan recalled now that Donahue was on his way to see the Golden Star Mine's superintendent about shipping his bullion via Ferris instead of Curt Vining's rival line. Well, that would keep Donahue out of Sue's sight for today.

Morgan didn't at all like this trend of thought or the way things stood between himself and Donahue. They'd been the closest of friends until they had both decided that little red-haired Sue Ferris was the one and only.

Donahue swung his horse away from the hitching rack and walked him past the big stagecoach.

"Take 'er easy, Dan," Donahue said.

Morgan bobbed his head quickly. "Sure, Al," he said, as casually as he could. "Be seeing you . . ."

Then Donahue raised an arm in farewell to Sue and touched spurs to his pony. The horse raced out of town.

Felix Barker was clambering up the side of the coach. Dan Morgan looked down at John Ferris. Worry lined his face.

"Keep your eyes open, Dan," Ferris said. "You got a mighty valuable shipment riding with you today."

Barker was gathering the reins into his hands. Morgan said, "You know me, Mr. Ferris. Nobody's going to catch me sleeping."

Ferris gave a relieved grin and Sue lifted a little hand toward Morgan. "Please be careful, Dan," she called, fear edging her voice.

Morgan patted the stock of his shotgun. "I will."

THE coach started with a jolt that rocked him back against the roof of the Concord. Morgan swore and Felix Barker chuckled as he tooled the four-span down the wide main street.

"If you weren't so damn busy making calf's eyes at Sue you'd be ready when I start."

Morgan didn't say anything. He just kept looking back over his shoulder at Sue standing there in front of the depot until the coach took that sudden dip and Sue and the town were gone from his sight.

After that there was only the swaying and rocking of the coach under him. Bit chains jingling and harness squeaking. Dust churned up by the fast, rolling high wheels, hanging like a brown fog all about the coach and settling like fine powder on his clothing.

That's all it was for several miles. Then, through the brown dust-fog, Morgan saw them come popping out from behind Painted Rock. It was all very sudden. All at once there were two masked riders, mounted, with guns in their hands.

Dan Morgan was tall and slim with a slow drawling voice and a lazy saunter to his walk, but he could move fast—as he was moving now. The shotgun roared, both barrels, over the upswinging heads of the four-span. One of the cow ponies became riderless.

Felix Barker hauled back on the lines, cursing in a hollow, fear-racked voice, while the four-span wheeled off the road and wound up in rearing, pawing confusion.

The remaining bandit was banging away at Morgan, but the little cow pony was all up in the air with the noise of the pistol shots and the echo of the shotgun's roar and the squealing and snorting of the four-span. The cow pony didn't want to stand still even though his rider had a solid back-pull on the lines. The pony kept spinning around in circles, making his rider miss, and at the same time affording a dancing, difficult target for Morgan.

Dan had dropped his shotgun as soon as it discharged. He disdained the .30-30 for the action was close, sixshooter range. His .45 slipped into his hand and he wished that the pony weren't so skitterish.

Something plucked at Morgan's sleeve. Then a sharp sting. He felt the wet warmth of blood. A bullet from behind.

The bandit on the plunging pony was forgotten. Morgan wheeled, crouching low in the box. Over the top of the Concord he saw another man on the side of the

trail. This man had a horse trained to gun-smoke and gun-roar. That made him a better target.

Another bullet blasted splinters out of the seat against Morgan's cheek. Dan thrust the sixshooter out over the Concord, resting his elbow on the roof. He got off two quick shots. The man on the horse shuddered. His head dropped and he rolled out of his saddle.

Barker had the frightened four-span straighted out now and back on the road. Morgan was almost hurled from the coach by the sudden lurch of the horses. He saved himself by grabbing the iron guard rail of the seat and dragging himself back into the box.

After a spell Barker slowed the span to a walk. Morgan said grimly, "I want to go back there and see who it was."

"How the hell can I turn around here?"

"Unhitch a horse," Morgan said. "I'll ride him back."

Barker went back, too. The body of the buckshot-riddled bandit wasn't a pretty sight. The four-span had run right over him. The other man lay where he had fallen, his well-trained horse standing obediently with trailing reins.

Barker turned this man over and all at once Morgan's knees were water and a tiny voice kept trying to tell his sanity that this was all a dream and he'd wake up any second now with cold sweat streaming down his face.

But the seconds just flew by and it wasn't any dream but chilling reality. Barker looked up with mixed horror and anger in his eyes.

"It's Al," he whispered, the words whistling hoarsely through his throat. "Al Donahue . . ."

THEY completed the run to the railhead at Silverton and unloaded the bullion. Then they started the return run to Lode. Neither of them had anything to say.

When they unloaded the bodies at the depot in Lode, it was again like a bad dream to Morgan. Sue's frightened gasp—then her anguished sobs as she recognized Al Donahue.

The sheriff came and Morgan gave the law his version. When the shots came from his back he just whirled and let fly with his six-shooter. He was sure there had been a mask on Donahue's face but when Morgan and Barker went back to the scene of the holdup there was no sign of a mask.

The sheriff queried Barker.

Barker shrugged. "I don't know, Sheriff. I had my hands full with them damn horses jumping all over themselves and snorting. I remember Dan turning and shooting at someone in back of us but I never set eyes on him. Then the horses broke away from there. When I went back with Dan there was no mask on Al's face."

And that's all there was. Anyway, Morgan hoped that's all there would be. It was going to be hard getting over killing Al Donahue, but time would heal that wound.

John Ferris clapped his gun-guard on the back. "It's all right, Dan. Just try and forget."

Sue was still sobbing. Morgan couldn't bring his throat to work for him. He just squeezed her arm a little and then walked out.

Morgan crossed to the saloon and pushed through the swing doors. He needed a bracer and needed it bad.

He ordered a double shot and downed it all in one gulp and then he stood there, waiting for it to hit him. His stomach began to glow and feel good and he ordered another double. He swallowed this and felt the glow start to spread, reaching all the way up to his brain, easing the pain in his mind.

Someone stopped at the bar beside Morgan. Someone in a light gray business suit and a gold watch chain strung across his vest. Curt Vining, owner of the rival Consolidated Stage Co. Beyond him, Morgan could see Vining's satellite—the thin, sallow-complexioned gunman called Billy Deal.

They ordered their drinks and Vining faced Deal and said, "It's funny, Billy, the things a man will do when he wants a woman—and someone else also wants her. A man will even commit murder . . ."

Billy Deal nodded in agreement, his eyes flicking time and again to Morgan's face. "Yeh," Deal murmured. "Some men just go crazy over a woman."

Vining sipped his drink. "They sure go crazy, Billy. Crazy enough to kill—especially when they know they can get away with it."

Morgan slapped his shot glass down on the bar and, reaching out, spun Vining around.

"I ought slap every one of those words back in your mouth," Morgan said through his teeth.

Vining blandly spread his hands. "What's come over you, Dan? I was just making conversation with Billy."

"You were making trouble," Morgan spat out. The whiskey was in his brain now, filling him with a sort of joyful truculence. "I ought to mop up the floor with you. That pretty gray suit of yours would make a fine mop."

As he reached for Vining, Deal stepped forward, six-shooter in hand. "Who's going to mop up the floor with who, Morgan?"

Dan dropped his outstretched hands while his lips curled back in a mirthless smile. "You cheap, second-rate gunman," Morgan said. "Put up that gun before I take it away from you!"

The bartender had scurried around from behind the bar and he placed himself in front of Dan, crowding him toward the door.

"Please, Dan," he begged. "No trouble in here. Outside if you want to fight. Not in here . . . Go on home, Dan. You're all upset. Nobody meant nothing."

Morgan swept the bartender aside. "I'll go, Mike, without you crowding me." His hot eyes fixed themselves on Vining. "And you, Vining, put a halter on that tongue of yours or I'll dust the whole main street of Lode with you and that washed up hired gun of yours."

IT WAS the end of another run and Dan climbed down from the high box of the Concord and walked into Ferris' office. Sue was at her desk, making entries in a ledger. Morgan tossed a slip of paper on the ledger.

"Howdy, Sue," he said, putting on a smile. "Here's the receipt for today's bullion shipment."

Sue didn't look up. She just placed the receipt to one side and went on making entries.

"Am I poison, Sue?"

She said nothing. "What's come over you?" Dan wanted to know. "You've been getting cooler every day since I shot Al. You seemed to understand at first that I couldn't help it, that I was sure he was one of the bandits. But the last few days you won't even look at me."

"Please, Dan. I'm busy, can't you see?"

Ferris came stamping into the office. Morgan whirled on him. "Well, John?" Morgan said, a little loudly.

Ferris sat down at his desk. "Well, what, Dan?"

"You and Sue and everyone else believes that I shot and killed Al Donahue on purpose, don't you, John?"

Ferris shrugged, went on glancing over the papers in his hand. Morgan went on bitterly.

"So you do believe all those lies spread about me by Curt Vining. Saying that I killed Al just to get rid of him so I would have a clear hand with Sue. That Al was helping me against those bandits. You and Sue have come to believe that, haven't you?"

Ferris said nothing. Morgan's anger burst into flame. Walking over to Ferris' desk, Morgan ripped the papers out of the old man's hands and scattered them over the floor.

"Answer me?" Morgan shouted. "Why don't you accuse me to my face? Why don't you swear out a warrant against me? Why don't you put me on trial instead of accusing me behind my back . . . I suppose you think I don't feel anything inside me. You don't think I've been through hell these last two weeks."

Morgan threw his double-barreled shotgun on Ferris' desk. "Here is your damn gun and your damn job. Find yourself another gun-guard."

He stalked out of the office and headed straight for the Alhambra.

The first thing he knew was the brown taste in his mouth and the burning thirst. And then when he opened his eyes the angry regret that always came the morning after.

But it wasn't morning. Only darkness all around him and he reached out with his hands and felt the straw underneath him and so he thought a while and gradually remembrance came and he knew that as usual he had sought refuge and drunken slumber in McNaughton's Livery. This had been his pattern the past ten days, ever since he had quit John Ferris.

Morgan lay there, cringing at the throbbing of his head, and the other sound worked into his consciousness—the sound of men's voices. He listened first against his will, for he yearned most for more forgetful sleep, but then it came to him that one voice was Curt Vining's.

Morgan had figured out by now that he was lying in the straw loft and that the voices were coming from the hay mow. Vining had spoken first. Now the other man was talking . . .

"Yeh, Mr. Vining. Ferris is sending out another shipment of bullion in the morning. I'm to take it out on the passenger run—no guard, no nothing. Only Ferris' daughter riding as a passenger to check the bullion in at Silverton. About an hour later a dummy shipment will follow in a freight wagon with about a half dozen guards. Ferris is going to advertise the dummy shipment real loud so that the stage I'm handling can slip through."

"Well, Tex, I can tell you that stage won't slip through. The boys will be waiting at Painted Rock. When you get stopped, talk kind of rough and make out you're damn mad about it all. That'll help cover you up."

"Sure thing, Mr. Vining."

"Youre a good man, Tex. Stick with me and you'll go places. I'm on my way up and I'll take care of a good man. The Ferris outfit is only the first I'm taking over. I'm gonna make Consolidated the biggest stage line in the West. I need an undercover man like you. When Ferris folds up, I've got another job for you around Alamosa."

Tex chuckled softly. "That won't be long. If Ferris loses this bullion shipment he's through. The mines won't ship anymore via Ferris. Consolidated will get all their business."

"Okay, Tex. You run along now. And be careful going out of here. Don't let anyone see you."

A COUPLE cups of black coffee set Morgan aright the next morning. His head still buzzed a little and at times he had faint touches of nausea but his mind was clear and his decision was made.

He packed his things and walked down to the ticket office of Ferris Stage Line and bought a one-way ticket to Silverton. Once there he'd get on the narrow-gauge train and get the hell out of this country. That's what he should have done after killing Donahue.

He noted with a kind of acid amusement the activity in the freight yard. Already the guards were there, strutting around the yard, carrying rifles, shotguns and six-shooters. There was a lot of loud, purposeful talk about one bullion shipment that sure as hell was going through.

Morgan looked at the big red Concord parked in front of the depot and thought again of the little conversation he'd overheard last night in McNaughton's and of the way Vining had gone away in the middle of the night to contact his men and inform them of the ruse.

As he had said, Vining was up and coming and John Ferris was through. An epidemic of holdups ever since Morgan had quit had placed Ferris on his last legs. Morgan told himself that such a thing no longer mattered to him and that John Ferris and his outfit and the people of Lode and Silverton could all go to hell. Yet somehow there was a strange regret in him.

A couple of hostlers hitched up the four-span and then the driver came out of the ticket office. He was a big, wide-shouldered man in his forties. A livid scar ran down his left cheek.

Morgan looked the driver over closely. This was Tex Jackson, the informer. John Ferris had got hard up for drivers after a couple of them had been shot in holdups and Felix Barker had been kicked by a horse. That was how Vining had sneaked his man in.

Sue came out of the office, looking real pretty in a light blue dress and bonnet. Morgan felt his heart twist and hurt at sight of her and he was instantly glad that he was going away, never more to be tortured by sight of her. She did not look at Morgan and he watched her pass, silent, and let Tex Jackson help her inside the coach.

There were two other passengers. A whiskey drummer and a miner. Tex Jackson took their tickets and watched them get into the Concord. Then he turned his baleful stare on Morgan.

"You riding, too?"

Morgan handed over his ticket. "I'll ride upstairs with you."

"Passengers ride inside. All of them."

Morgan gave a hitch to his shell belt. "I've ridden plenty of coaches but never inside of one. I don't aim to begin now."

Jackson shrugged and swung up into his seat. Morgan walked around the coach, placed one boot on the hub of the front wheel and climbed up beside Jackson.

The Concord rattled out of Lode with the gun-guards still parading around the freight yard, bragging about how in an hour they'd hit the road to Silverton with a bullion shipment that neither hell nor high water would stop.

RIDING like this did things to Morgan. He recalled all the other times he had ridden out of Lode, sitting high and proud on his seat, watching how the sudden drop down into a ravine cut off sight of Lode with an abrupt sharpness. Now he was riding away never to return.

This had been his life, this job of riding gun-guard, knowing that a great trust had been placed in his hands and that he was worthy of it. He'd been entrusted with the wealth and property and even the lives of others and it had been his pride that he had never failed.

Now that was all past and gone. He'd go some place where he was unknown and try to start all over but he knew he'd never forget the memory of all these people he had known and of the sights that had been so pleasant in his eyes.

He did not want to leave but there was no use hanging around any more. Not that there was any open ostracism of him. People just maintained that he had become trigger-happy. Too ready with a gun. No one was safe when Morgan went into action. The heat of battle was too much for him and he could not distinguish friend from foe. That's how the talk ran and he'd begun to wonder if it wasn't true. He began to doubt that he'd ever seen a mask on Al Donahue and that doubt was hell itself for Morgan.

The miles rolled away beneath the high, churning wheels of the coach. Tex Jackson, contrary to the almost universal habit of his profession, made no effort at conversation. And neither did Morgan. The driver concentrated on his work, yelling at times in a hoarse bellow and then yipping shrill cries, as he tooled his four-span over the road and Morgan began to know a genuine admiration for the man's skill. Sneaking spy though he be, Tex Jackson sure could handle horses.

Morgan looked about him, reading all the old familiar signs. There was the side road that led to the Bar HK ranch. Another quarter mile and they'd reach Painted Rock.

He smiled grimly. He'd seen his life and ambitions blasted at Painted Rock. Now John Ferris would see his life and ambitions blasted in the identical spot.

Morgan's smile did not last long. He knew a sudden regret that he had not warned Ferris. But Morgan had fooled himself into thinking that there would be a vast delight for him in Ferris' disaster. Now that no longer held true.

Painted Rock rolled closer. Sweat poured down Morgan's face. He glanced at Tex Jackson, guiding the racing four-span with taut-held lines, hat brim flattened against the wind.

Morgan wiped sweat off his upper lip. Painted Rock was only minutes away. He had no shotgun or rifle. Only the sixshooter at his right hip. Hardly enough to stop a well planned holdup.

Here was Painted Rock. There were the motes dancing in the dust stirred up by the coach. Three motes this time with guns pointing and Tex Jackson was hauling back on the lines, curses spilling from his lips.

MORGAN reckoned he'd have a chance only if surprise set the odds in his favor. After all, the bandits had been told that there was going to be no opposition. The driver was one of them and there was to be no guards. So they probably wouldn't expect any resistance.

Morgan had eased his gun out of the holster before the masked riders appeared. He reckoned that odds of three to one were good enough to allow him the first shot.

The heavy .45 barked in his hand and one of the riders folded up over the pommel of his saddle and then spilled to the road.

The other two bandits opened up but not before Morgan got off another shot. Another bandit howled, dropping his six-gun and clutching at his middle. His pony gave

a sudden rearing lurch and that bandit, too, was unhorsed.

Tex Jackson had thrown himself at Morgan. Dan twisted savagely, swinging his gun arm away from Jackson. Jackson went for Morgan's throat, driving him back against the guard rail. Desperately, Dan made one long swinging loop, bringing the long barrel of his six-shooter against Jackson's skull.

Jackson went limp. Morgan grabbed the man's belt and lifted Jackson up and over the side of the box. He went spinning to the ground.

The four-span hadn't stopped this time. They hadn't heeded Jackson's back-pull on the lines. They had just roared straight ahead, crowding the one remaining bandit off the road, but now he took after the stage.

Morgan turned in the box. The whiskey drummer was babbling incoherently inside the coach. The remaining bandit had a very fast pony and he was catching up to the stage.

He lifted his arm and fired and the bullet ricocheted off the guard rail with a twanging whine.

Morgan stretched his gun arm over the bouncing roof of the coach, squinted along the sights and emptied his six-shooter. For a moment he knew the coldness that he had missed. The pony ran swift and true with the bandit standing in his stirrups, gun raised and pointing at Morgan. Then all at once the bandit began to sag, and his gun arm dropped and he kept sagging until he rolled out of the saddle.

Morgan stopped the frenzied four-span and turned around, driving back to Painted Rock.

He looked over the bandits sprawled in the dust of the road, conscious that Sue Ferris was at his heels, whitefaced and trembling.

The last bandit to fall was Curt Vining. Two of Morgan's bullets had entered the man's heart. One other bandit, a stranger to Morgan, was dead. Tex Jackson was sitting in the dust, dazedly shaking his head.

The last bandit was Billy Deal. He was alive but delirious and sinking fast. His feverish raving set Morgan's blood to tingling.

"Curt's the wise guy," Deal babbled. "He knew everything . . . Stick to me, Billy, and you'll buy diamonds and rubies and pearls for your Rosie in El Paso. I'm going up in the world, Billy . . . Big shot . . . Get Al Donahue, too. He hates Morgan's guts . . . He's crazy about that little Sue Ferris, Al is. He'll kill Morgan to get that girl. Take Al with you, Billy, and remember, Morgan is Al's meat . . . Rosie's gonna be proud of you, Billy. Buy her diamonds and dresses out of New York . . . Take Al's mask with you. We'll spread it how Al was siding Morgan but Morgan was too trigger-happy and killed Al so Morgan could have the girl . . . Al hates Morgan's guts . . . Rosie . . . Buy you pearls . . . Milk-white pearls . . . I wish . . . I wish . . ."

That was all for the gunman called Billy Deal.

Sue Ferris rode up in the box with Dan Morgan all the way to Silverton. She rode with both hands clasped around his arm and her cheek on his shoulder and several times when he looked at her he thought he saw tear-mist in her eyes, the kind of tear-mist that comes with contrition and happiness all mixed up together.

FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES A Fiction House Magazine FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES

Sigrod yelled and came charging down the hill just as Wastewin peered over the ledge. Before she could cry out, Hogarth and Geddes were spitting lead.

Gun-Witch From Wyoming

By LES SAVAGE, JR.

The lush grazeland of the Big Horns was ripe ror pickin', and Texas Bob Hogarth was set to make his play . . . 'til a fire-haired wench's hex-guns spoke a hooter warning: *Kerry Arnold plays second-gun to no one on wild Wyoming range.*

BOB Hogarth's eyes were red-rimmed and feverish from sleepless nights of trailing the cattle north, but they still held a lucid, feral restlessness, peering into the timber on the slope above this narrow valley. There was a certain restrained savagery in the downward turn at one corner of his thin lips, too, a sense of capacity for brutal expedience. He bent slightly to the side, lifting the tail of his slicker off the damp oak stock of his saddle gun, booted beneath his left stirrup leather. He remained that way, with the dim cattle sounds about him, until the movement he had sensed in the trees resolved itself into a man.

"Got 'em, Bobby boy," said Waco Wilhams, easing his gaunted dun horse down a slippery clay bank from timber. "Just let it be known I was in Meeteetse with a

cattle proposition and the whole board of the Bighorn Basin Cattle Co-operative showed up. I think we have something here if we use it right. They're in a big tight."

"Sketch it," said Hogarth, casting a last sharp look at the herd, then necking his hairy little skewbald around to clamber up the slushy bank.

"No big cattle operators up here, only this combine called the Basin Co-op," said Waco Williams. There was a sense of complete relaxation to his lanky figure. Externally, his face bore the same weathered hardness as Hogarth's. "The main support of the co-op seems to come from beef contracts with the Indian agencies up north. The big freeze of '87 wiped out most of their running stock, same way as it did around Cheyenne. They don't have enough stuff to meet their contracts this year, and stand to lose it to an English firm that's imported a bunch of whitefaces for the deal. Is that enough to suggest some angles?"

Hogarth halted his skewbald before they reached a motte of dripping poplars and turned to indicate the Big Horns, shaggy with spring timber, rising into a somber lead sky. "I bet this land's green when the rain stops, Waco. There's more grass here in one acre than you'll find in a hundred square miles around Devil's River. And the water. They say there's creeks up here bankfull all year 'round. I think I like it."

Waco leaned toward him, a rare sobriety entering his voice. "Then maybe this is it, Bobby. If we play the cards right, maybe this is it."

Hogarth's head dipped in a short, hard nod, and he heeled his skewbald into the trees.

The four riders had dismounted beside the camp Hogarth and Waco had established here, standing in a sodden group beside their steaming horses. Waco indicated the woman first, without getting off his horse.

"Kerry Arnold," he said, and Hogarth got an impression of singular size, for a woman, and red hair tucked up under a flat-topped Mormon, and a rich, creamy beauty to the flesh of her face, pink through the cheeks from the cold. Thirty, maybe, he thought, and then shifted his attention to the men. "Sigrod Trygvesson, Rane Trygvesson, George Chapel," muttered Waco in his careless introduction, indicating each man with his hand.

SIGROD and Rane were patently father and son, both ponderous giants with something unmistakably Viking in their long yellow hair and glacial blue eyes, thick mackinaws only adding to the singular size of their shoulders. Chapel emanated a certain subservience to the woman. Yet Hogarth did not overlook the individuality the man retained in his searching grey eyes.

Hogarth's single-rigger made a mute, leathery protest as he swung off the horse, turning to the woman. "The freeze had hit them in Cheyenne too hard to offer us cash, and we didn't want credit from a bunch of mortgaged outfits. I hope you have something to put on the barrelhead."

The woman's laugh was as rich as her beauty. "They told me you Texans didn't waste any time. How big is your herd?"

"Four hundred," said Hogarth, and Wacos face did not change expression.

The woman's heavy blonde brows drew together. "With two men."

"We were with a trailherd to Cheyenne, that's the Bar H roadbrand you'll find on them," he said. "Ten dollars a head is the price. Do you want it?'

"Ten dollars!' Sigrod Trygvesson's roar fairly shook the poplars. "That's two dollars above the market in Cheyenne. You can't hold us up!"

Hogarth let his glance flicker to the huge Norseman, and saw that Waco was watching them. "This is the market right here, Trygvesson. Have you got the money?"

"Look," said Kerry Arnold, and the movement of her body toward him drew her slicker across curves he would rather have left out of this. "Maybe you wouldn't accept credit in Cheyenne, but our contracts with the government certainly constitute a security as acceptable as cash."

"If you're so substantial an association why won't the banks extend you credit?" asked Hogarth.

She held out her hands. "The freeze hit everybody alike up here. The banks are tight too. Can't some kind of an arrangement be made?"

"Land's selling a dollar an acre where I come from," he said. "At ten dollars a head for four hundred head that makes four

thousand dollars. You seem to have the situation completely closed up around these parts. Maybe the association has a strip of good graze around that many acres."

The woman gazed at him with a new comprehension in her wide blue eyes, without answering. Their tacit acceptance of her leadership had given them a unity Hogarth disliked up to now. He let his eyes fall on Sigrod, seeing that the man had not yet comprehended all the implications. Sigrod shifted uncomfortably under Hogarth's gaze.

"There's thirty five hundred acres up by Medicine Wheel Creek—"

"Sigrod!' said Kerry sharply.

"No," said Rane. It was the first time he had spoken, and the craggy bony structure of his face held more sharp perception than his father's. "We aren't letting anybody else move in, Hogarth. We've managed to keep this range free of big operators and the ruination that comes with them the way it has in Johnson County. That land isn't for sale at any price."

"For sale?" said Sigrod. "Who's selling any land?"

"There must be some other way," said Chapel.

"Name it," said Hogarth. He waited, seeing comprehension dawn completely in Sigrod's face now, finally, and anger follow it. The woman was breathing more perceptibly, a delicate flush filling her face. Hogarth reached up a thumb to run it absently across his lower teeth in a habitual, vaguely speculative gesture. "You won't have a co-operative if you don't pull through this year. Half the operators around Cheyenne have gone under already, and any one of them could have bought and sold the whole bunch of you."

"No." Sigrod shook his head stupidly. "No."

"Then I guess we're through talking," said Hogarth, turning to his skewbald.

"Wait a minute," called Rane, moving toward Hogarth.

"Rane," bellowed his father.

"You can't do this, Hogarth," said Rane, catching Hogarth's shoulder. "Williams gave us the idea a deal could be made. You know what kind of a position we're in and you're taking advantage of it—"

"Let me go, Rane," said Hogarth.

"No," shouted the young man, jerking at Hogarth to try and force him back around, "You Texas thralls think you can come up here and play fylk-king like a bunch of—"

"Rane," cried the woman, but already it was too late, already Hogarth had whirled around. It took him in close to the gigantic youth. He let his knee rise as he whirled. Rane's shout deafened Hogarth with animal pain.

Hogarth's shift to the side was as swift and calculated as his first turn had been. It placed him at Rane's side as the man doubled forward in spasmodic agony. It put the back of Rane's thick neck before him. Hogarth struck it in a vicious chopping blow. Rane went face down on the ground.

"I guess not," said Waco Williams, and it turned Hogarth to see the tall slouching man still sitting his dun with his saddle gun held casually across the pommel, holding them from whatever each had intended doing. Sigrod's hand was still on the butt of his forty five. His whole body seemed held in trembling suspension by Waco's gun.

"You shouldn't have done that, Hogarth," he said, in a choked, guttural voice. "He's my son. You shouldn't have done that."

"I think I should," said Hogarth flatly. "I think everybody had to be shown a little more clearly where I stand. Either a man puts his hands on me or he doesn't. Either we make a deal or we don't. I don't care for discussions." He paused a moment, adding it more softly. "And I don't care to be handled."

"Sure thing, said Waco lazily. "Some folks are smart. They believe Bobby when he tells them. Others are sort of slow to get in the saddle. They have to be shown."

Kerry Arnold was studying Hogarth narrowly, a strange light in her deep blue eyes, and finally she drew a slow, careful breath through pursed lips. "All right, Mr. Hogarth. Be in Meeteetse tomorrow at ten. The Co-operative has offices in the Bighorn building. We'll see that you're satisfied."

His lips lifted in that ironic, lopsided way. "Will you, Miss Arnold?"

THE spring rain had stopped, and the drip of water into soggy decay held a lonely sound. Kerry Arnold and the Tryg-

vessons had left half an hour before, and after a pot of coffee, Waco was putting on dry clothes for his watch on the cattle, singing to himself.

"But one day he met a man a whole lot badder
And now he's dead, we're none the sadder . . ."

"Someday I'm going to find a poke," said Hogarth, unsaddling his animal, "who knows the rest of that song—damn, this latigo's hell to unhitch when it's wet—and sit you down and make you learn the whole thing before I let you up again."

"It's about Billy the Kid," said Waco, holding up his sodden levis. "That slicker of mine ain't worth pinto beans when it came to shedding water. It's too bad they have to be the slow type."

Hogarth had finally pulled the knot in his latigo free, jerking it from the cinch ring. "Who?"

"These Swedes. The slow-thinkers don't forget things like that. You'll be bucking it as long as you're here, I guess."

Hogarth heaved off his saddle. "All right."

Waco began rubbing his torso with a blanket, turning toward him. "You're really going to move in, then?"

Hogarth set the kack down, straightened. He looked down at his small, hard hands, covered with rope burns and callouses and scars. "I've been trying to break in big for a long time, Waco. I guess you know how long. I'm through trying it with my hands. From now on it's going to be my head. There's a chance here and I'm playing it out to the end of the dally. Do you want to ride along?"

"I been on your trail five years," said Waco. "Why should I look for a new one now? That why you told them we only had four hundred cows?"

"If we get that pasture by Medicine Wheel Creek we'll need some stock on it. Last count was four-fifty. Before I leave tomorrow morning we'll cut out fifty of the best and drive them over into the next valley. Right?"

"Right as Colonel Colt," said Waco. "Only with that woman—"

He stopped talking as Hogarth bent to heave the kack back on his skewbald. The little pony groaned protestingly and tried to blow up. Hogarth waited till she took a breath, then slapped a foot against her spotted hide and yanked the latigo tight, cinching it up with efficient, practiced movements that held no sense of rush in their swift skill. Waco turned to scoop up his denim ducking jacket and slip it over his bare torso. It was a tacit understanding that came to men after that long together on the trail.

"If they're smart they won't do anything in this direction," said Hogarth, swinging aboard. "That only leaves the other ridge and the mouth. I'll take the ridge."

He turned the pony into the poplars and saw Waco climb on his dun and wheel the animal toward the mouth of the box canyon they had put the herd into. Hogarth followed timber as much as he could around the slope, to keep under cover. He did not see again the movement among the cattle which he had first spotted. But the animals themselves were shifting nervously now, lowing softly, and the unrest was spreading. He made it around the box-end, crossing the cliff-edge through scrub-oak, and went down the other ridge, careful not to skylight himself. A fugitive moon fingered scudding clouds. Then the light broke through in a yellow spasm and revealed what he wanted down there.

THE distance made the rider visible only by the difference of shape among the cattle. Hogarth gave a tug at the worn stock of his old Ward-Burton to loosen it in its saddle-case beneath his left leg, and turned the skewball downhill. Scrub juniper stood in warped clans on the lower slope, and he halted in this, trying to make out the rider more clearly. If it were Arnold and her bunch, there would be others. He searched the timber covering the slope on either side of him, but failed to detect anything.

The bawling of the cattle had taken on a raucous irritation. If the rider intended stampede, Hogarth could not stop him now. And yet if the horsebacker were cutting out a bunch, Hogarth had never seen a clumsier job. The movement shifted back and forth with patent indecision in the growing aggravation of the cattle. It didn't line up with what Arnold would want. It drew a nervous anger through Hogarth. Finally the rider separated from the herd, driving one cow.

"Gotch?" he muttered, because it was their old lead steer with the gotched horn, and that could have added up, and yet it didn't, the way things were going. Just slow and easy, working the animal up through the buffalo grass toward the junipers. The wily old steer was hard to drive when it didn't want to go, but now the rider was showing more skill. Hogarth wondered what they were doing?

The rider had almost reached the trees with Gotch now. Finally Hogarth began shifting through the scrub timber toward the spot where the rider would enter it farther down. He had come close enough to see that the horse was a pinto. He had moved with great caution, and should not rightly have been sighted. Whoever it was had uncanny eyesight. The pinto was pulled up suddenly, as by a startled tug on the reins, and then with the grunt of a kicked horse, bolted forward at Gotch's flank. Both rider and steer hit the black warped timber with a crash of underbrush.

"All right," swore Hogarth, and gave his skewbald a boot. It was a crazy race through the twisted trees. He could see the peerless horsemanship of the rider ahead sometimes, the pinto twisting and writhing through the close stands like a snake, sometimes seeming to double up on itself. His own horse smashed into the junipers time after time as he forced it on through in a wild gallop, and he was dripping alligator bark. Gotch cut away from the rider ahead and ran bawling back into the valley. Then Hogarth saw the horseback hit a trunk finally, and literally bounce off, unhorsed. He couldn't help a cry of satisfaction, and thumped his heels into the skewbald anew.

But the figure ahead had already rolled to its feet and jumped after the frightened pinto. It was a running mount over the pinto's rump, and Hogarth could not help the thrill of admiration at such skill. The pinto wheeled up through the juniper and broke into an open glade and struck the ridge, skylighted there for a moment. Hogarth forced his blowing pony up after it. He dismounted beneath the crest and went to his belly, worming to the ridge. From there he could see into the next valley. This slope was not so heavily timbered, but at the bottom a line of thick cottonwoods marked a stream. He searched the area a long time, but no movement came to him, no sign. In disgust, he went back to his horse and climbed on. He had reached the spot where the pinto had rammed the tree when dim sound from below caused him to stiffen in the saddle.

"Waco," came the soft voice, and in a moment, the tall, lazy man climbed his dun into view. "Heard a little ruckus up here. Arnold's bunch?"

"I don't know." Hogarth had dismounted and was staring at the juniper into which the pinto had run. There was a long red quill caught in the torn alligator bark. "Just one rider on a pinto. And what a rider." He bent over the short wet grass, clearly showing the imprints where a body had struck and rolled, trampled by the running feet. Finally he picked up something. Waco bent from the saddle to stare at it. The small cylindrical case was made of cherry wood and filled with a soft cottony substance that might have been swansdown, and in this lay the crudely carved figure of a bird.

"What in Davy Crockett's name is that?" asked Waco.

Hogarth turned it over and over in his hand, and that ironic smile finally titled his lips at one side. "Could it be a fylke-king?"

II

MEETEETSE was an Indian name for place of rest, or far away, and it was the last outfitting point for the vast wilderness drained by the Greybull River. Sagging false-fronted buildings shouldered one or two newer pressed-brick structures on Main, which was the only avenue worthy of being called a street. The Bighorn Building was a two story frame on the corner of Main and First, and coming in from the south on the early side of ten o'clock, Bob Hogarth could not miss it.

He drew in his skewbald beside a sleek looking roan bearing a Big Dipper brand. He gave himself time to scan the street while he took the rawhide reins over his pony's head and hitched them on the cottonwood rack. There were two men on the porch of the general store across the street. One leaned a rickety chair against the rotting weatherboards, peeling an apple. The other lounged with one shoulder against the doorframe, thumbs hooked into a gunbelt.

His size was singular, and his long blonde hair.

The porch popped beneath Hogarth's feet. There was a covered stairway leading up outside the building. Just before Hogarth entered this a man appeared in the doorway of the first story, glanced at the skewbald, and turned back in.

There was a musty hall and a line of office doors. Number one was Oswald Karnes, Law Offices. Number two was the Basin Co-operative. Hogarth knocked and was admitted by a feminine voice from within. It was Kerry Arnold, rising from a tattered leather overstuffed to one side of the room. There was a roll-top desk cluttered with papers and a swivel chair and a wire wastebasket. He wondered if the expression on her face was an irritation that he could take in the rest of the room with her standing there.

"The others will be here in a few minutes," she said. "We held a meeting last night. I had to do a little persuading, but they finally realized it was about the only thing we could do if we wanted to keep our heads above water. Your four hundred combined with what cattle we can raise will fill enough of the government contract to keep it in our hands."

He nodded and moved to the window. "Is that one of Trygvesson's sons on the porch of the store?"

She moved beside him, and the light caught the fruitlike curve of her cheek in a disturbing softness. "Oh, those fools," she muttered petulantly. "I told them to stay away. I didn't want any more trouble."

"It isn't Rane."

"Sigrod has three sons," she muttered. "That's Are, the youngest."

"Your horse?" he said, glance drooping to the roan.

"I'm the Big Dipper," she nodded, and turned toward him. Her breath held a faint perfumed scent against his face. "Take it easy now, Hogarth, will you?"

He moved across the room away from her, wanting to keep the reasoning faculties of his mind uppermost. "What was that mumbo-jumbo Rane was talking about yesterday. Thralls and fylke-king."

"Oh—" the toss of her head shook engaging red locks— "Sigrod came over from the old country and he hasn't got it out of him let. And not just the present day customs, either. He's descended from the Vikings or something and has what amounts to an obsession about it. You should see his house. It's like walking into history. He rules it like an emperor. His word is law. Every time he and those sons of his ride into town it reminds me of the Wolfings on a raid. But there's really no harm in him. A thrall is a minor noble, I guess. A fylke-king is the ruler of the petty dynasties they had in early times."

"This wouldn't apply, then," he said, taking the small cherry-wood box from his pocket.

She came over to look, emitted a rueful little laugh. "Hardly. More Crow, or Blackfoot. Looks like a fetish of some kind. Didn't you have them in Texas?"

"Not like this," he said, moving to the window again.

"You're hard, aren't you?" she said. He turned in faint surprise to see her eyes were studying his small, calloused hands on the sill. "Hard and restless and grasping," she said, raising the glance to meet his. "Taught in the toughest school they have. Orphaned, maybe. Or ran away from home. Starting young, anyway, and learning the game the rough way. Enough brains not to be satisfied with punching cows or even hiring your gun out. Enough pride to want to rod your own corral. And now you've found something you want here and you're moving in. How many times have you tried to move in before, Hogarth?"

His voice held a dim mockery. "How discerning of you."

"You're not difficult to read, Hogarth," she said, her eyes filled with that narrow speculation. "You're a type. A prime example of a type. I've seen others like you up off the trail. But none with such evident capacity. They were hard, too, but they didn't have the brains. I can't blame you for ambition, Hogarth, but when a man like you wants something, whoever gets in his way is going to be hurt." She paused to breathe, lowering her head slightly so that she was looking up at him from beneath the red arch of her brows. "You don't really think you can move in here, like that, do you, Hogarth?"

He met her gaze, without answering. She was clever. He had sensed it upon their first meeting, but now the impact of it was full enough for clear recognizance. A rare

mind. A keen, pungent intelligence which would be more dangerous than all Trygvessons's strength, if she chose to oppose him. He allowed a faint smile to cross his face.

"What do you think the chances are?" he asked.

THAT took her off-guard for a moment and before she could recover the hall stairs clattered to someone's boots. George Chapel opened the door, ran hostile grey eyes over Hogarth, then stepped in and aside to admit the others. There was a heavy-set black-haired man with a guileless emptiness to his wide dark eyes and a solid way of walking.

"George Tremaine, Big Bit," said Chapel. "This is Hogarth, George."

"Pleasure," said the owner of the Big Bit, his square black spade beard moving faintly with the words.

Moving right behind him was a buckskinned Indian with braided hair and obsidian eyes. Behind the Indian was a man so fat he had trouble entering the door, his girth forming a billows of white marseille waistcoast, a stiff white collar cutting deep into the doughy folds of fat rolled around his neck. His puffy cheeks had the unhealthy color of old paste.

'Oswald Karnes," Chapel said, and indicated Hogarth this time without bothering to say his name.

Karnes was panting from the climb. He fished a dank handkerchief from a pocket in his voluminous coat, mopping sweat from his brow. He lowered his chin into its folds, peering at Hogarth from small, twinkling eyes. They sent a vague disturbance through Hogarth.

"Well," chuckled Karnes. "Hogarth. Well."

"If you've got the maps, we'll show Hogarth,' said Kerry Arnold.

"Maps, yes," muttered the lawyer, waddling with patent effort to the table and lifting a brief case up to lay it down. His little eyes slid around in a sidelong glance at Hogarth. Then he pulled out a sheet of paper and a folded contract form. The map was of a strip of land just east of the Bighorn River, bounded by Medicine Wheel Creek and Big Stump Creek.

"We've marked off the south thirty-five hundred for you," said Karnes. "It's got a south slope to protect you from the chinooks. Grass three feet high in spring. Watered by Medicine Wheel the whole length of your southern boundary. You sign this transfer and contract and bill of sale for four hundred head of—"

"Let's step off the horse and look at the rigging again," said Hogarth. "Change that strip to the east thirty-five hundred. I want water on both ends of my land."

Karnes popped his little eyes in surprise. "I thought you were a cattleman, Hogarth. You lose half your grassland in a strip like that. The upper end of the pasture is all toplands with shale and talus—"

"And Medicine Wheel goes dry in the summer," said Hogarth. "You don't think I'd take this sight unseen do you? I've trailed cattle over that creek into Montana twice. Big Stump is the water I want. Alter the contract or it's no deal."

Tremaine showed nothing but blank surprise. Chapel's square face held a tight anger. The woman's smile held a grudging admiration.

"All right," shrugged Karnes. He shuffled over to the roll-top, swept a pile of papers away from a bottle of ink. Again it was that quick little glance to the side, like a circumspect bird. The scratch of the pen was the only sound. Hogarth moved to the window. A third man had joined the other two men on the porch across the street. He was even taller than Are Trygvesson, and his blond hair was longer.

"How old is Sigrod's third son?" asked Hogarth.

"Otherre?" said Kerry. "About twenty-five I guess—" she broke off, head lifting. Then she came to look out the window with him, and her face tightened. Hogarth turned sharply to George Tremaine.

"How long you had the Indian?"

Tremaine turned to the Indian, smiling faintly. "Oh, I'd say five years. Kasna was with me when I started the Big Bit, an invaluable fellow."

"Maybe you lost something," said Hogarth, slipping the cherry wood box from his pocket and tossing it to the Indian. Surprise caused Kasna to reach out and catch it. He stared at it a moment, then must have thought he had been tricked. His black eyes raised to Hogarth, and a small glitter had entered their obsidian opacity.

"Lakota," he spat, and threw it back to Hogarth.

"I guess it isn't his," said Tremaine. "Kasna's a Crow. The Lakota's are what the Sioux call themselves, I think."

"Do you?" said Hogarth. "This their pasture?"

"No . . ." Tremaine seemed hesitant, "not exactly . . ."

"What's the matter?" Hogarth's voice held an edge.

"Oh, there's been a lot of unrest among the Indians lately," said Kerry Arnold, irritably. "Ghost dancing going on at the Pine Ridge Agency, a lot of Sioux leaving, talk of an uprising. You're liable to find a few down this way."

"A Crow wouldn't have the same kind of a fetish a Sioux would?" said Hogarth.

"Definitely not," Tremaine told him. "What are you getting at?"

Hogarth was still by the window. He could see a rider on a prodigious white stallion riding in from the south now, just entering Main Street. Sunlight shone pale on his golden mane. Hogarth's lips drew against his teeth.

"Someone hit our herd last night," he said, barely moving his lips.

"Oh—" the woman tossed her head angrily—"do you think we're that stupid? We couldn't unload that beef on government contracts without a valid bill of sale from you. You're playing a hard game and we're trying to match you, Hogarth, but we still constitute a business enterprise and I don't think you'll find our methods any sharper than other business men."

THE window was in two sections, the bottom half pulled open, and Hogarth tapped a rocky knuckle against the dusty upper pane. "Is this part of those methods?"

It was Kerry Arnold who reached the window beside him first, staring down to Sigrod Trygvesson, who sat that immense snowy mare in the center of the rutted street now. "George," she said tightly, "they're coming in. The whole bunch of them."

George Chapel's bootheels made a small shuffle against the bare floor behind Hogarth. "There's a back stairs down, Hogarth, you'd better—"

"We haven't finished the business yet," said Hogarth. "Got that contract, Oswald?"

"Here's the pen, Hogarth," said the lawyer. "Right there on the bottom line."

Hogarth moved unhurriedly to sit on the edge of the desk, dangling one leg as he scanned the contract. They made nervous little shifting sounds about him. Karnes cleared his throat.

"This fifth clause," said Hogarth finally.

"The land belongs to the co-operative," said Karnes. "The clause is merely a formality to clarify that it is only the land we released."

"It's a little obscure," said Hogarth.

"There's Rane," said Kerry, from the window.

Hogarth reached for the pen, signed the contract, the bill of sale for four hundred cattle under the Bar H road brand. Each one in turn affixed their signatures, George Chapel last.

"The back door, Hogarth," said Chapel again. "Wait in the timber behind town. We'll bring you your horse when it's—"

"I don't run from any man," said Hogarth, and through the surprised silence that elicited, he walked to the hall door, opening it unhurriedly. Then he turned. "You have tried to convince me that you're not with Trygvesson in this. I'll believe you as long as you stay up here. If any of you follow me out, I'll consider him with Trygvesson, and deal with him accordingly."

He turned and went to the stairs, unbuttoning his canvas mackinaw and hitching his gun farther around front. He halted a moment just inside the doorway, accustoming his eyes to the brighter outer light and placing the four men. Otherre and Are still stood on the porch across the street.

On the opposite corner of First and Main, on this side of the street, Rane tilted one great shoulder against the two-by-four support of the wooden overhang projecting above the wooden sidewalk.

Hogarth stepped onto the sidewalk abruptly. The huge white mare made a fiddling shift in the middle of Main with Sigrod's faint, surprised jerk on the reins. Hogarth walked to the curb at one end of the cottonwood hitchrack where his skewbald and Kerry's roan were hitched.

"I've come for you, Hogarth," said Sigrod.

"How do you mean?" said Hogarth.

The mare stamped a foot. "You know how I mean. Nobody does to a Trygvesson what you did to Rane yesterday. Your man with the gun isn't with you today. Do you want to come into the street or shall I come to the sidewalk?"

The man tilting his chair back on the porch across the way leaned forward till the legs struck the floor with a small sharp sound. He rose and went into the dark doorway. It left only Are and Otherre standing there.

"Trygvesson," said Hogarth, spreading his feet a little and shoving back his mackinaw to stuff both hands in his pants pockets. "Do you mean you've come for me personally, or are your three sons going to pile in alongside."

The man straightened in his heavy Porter rig. "I told you. *I* have come."

"What kind of sons have you raised that they can't fight their own battles?" said Hogarth. Trygvesson's flush was even apparent at this distance. Rane had straightened from the two-by-four support. "I hear you take great pride in your descent from the Vikings," probed Hogarth. "Is this the way they did things? It couldn't have been much of a race if they had to have the odds four to one every time."

"I told you, I—"

"It couldn't even have been much of a race if the fathers had to protect the sons like they were daughters."

"Hogarth!" bellowed Trygvesson, the blood so thickly diffused in his face now his cheeks appeared almost purple. He sat stiffly, trembling visibly, words choked up in his throat with rage. Suddenly he turned toward his eldest son. "All right. Rane—"

But Rane had already stepped off the sidewalk. He was flushed. One big fist was opening and closing above the Frontier he packed. Hogarth turned to him, hands still in his pockets.

"Rane," he said, and the man must have thought Hogarth meant to meet it now, for he stopped in the middle of First, tilting his great weight forward on the balls of his feet.

"I'll fight my own battles," he growled.

"Every man should," said Hogarth. "But not without good reason. What's your reason for this?"

"Why do you keep asking? You know what it is."

"And you'd call that a good reason," said Hogarth. "You'd risk your life, you'd take a chance on my killing you, just over what happened yesterday. That's a child's reason."

"No man—"

"That's what your father said," Hogarth told him. "I don't think this is your reason at all. I think Sigrod has whipped you up to this, whipped you all up to this and brought you all in like a pack of dogs to set on a stranger. Is that the way you want to fight your battles? Aren't you old enough yet to decide why you want to fight and when?"

"Hogarth—"

But Hogarth saw he had him going, and cut the man off. "Rane, if it's still your father you have to account to for every move you make, tell him this for me. Given good reason, I'll fight any man, any time, any place, you, or your father, or the whole pack of you together, and I think you know that. Only I don't think this is reason enough, and I don't think you do either."

He turned and walked out to unhitch the reins of his skewbald. He threw them over the animal's head and climbed on without haste, turning the pony south, passing Sigrod in the center of the street. He did not look up to the offices of the Co-operative, but from the tail of his eye he caught a fleeting impression of Kerry Arnold's face in the window.

Then he was out of town, with the four Trygvessons behind him, Are and Otherre having come down off the porch into the street, Sigrod turning his mare about to stare after Hogarth in baffled rage, Rane, a confused, frustrated figure. Hogarth glanced down at his hands on the reins, and one of his rare smiles spread his lips.

"What'd I tell you, Waco," he chuckled to himself. "I'm through with the hands. From now on it's the head."

III

THE EMERALD sweep of buffalo grass rose out of the chocolate banks of Medicine Wheel Creek and welled

northward into the rock-ribbed talus. Both ridge and meadow swept eastward to beat against the ancient shoulders of the Bighorns and lose themsleves in shaggy timber.

They called it the Texas, and Hogarth sent Waco Williams north to register their Rocker T brand in Cody and pick up a couple of good hands. Then Hogarth turned the fifty-odd whitefaces he had cut out for his own use into the bottoms along Medicine Wheel and spent the first day excavating on the talus slope just beneath the ridge.

He cut a rectangular room some twenty feet long with the solid earth for the back wall and the front and sides of lumber and tarpaper he had hauled in from Meeteetse. The roof was of the same with a foot of dirt on top of this. With earth banked up high around the bottom it was weathertight. The evening of the second day, Hogarth was throwing up bunkframes along the sidewall when he heard the snort of a horse outside. His rifle was in its saddle scabbard in the corner, and he slipped it free and stepped to the door, seeing who it was before he showed himself.

"Looks like a nice spot for poker in the winter," grinned Waco Williams, slipping out of the saddle.

"Big Stump comes out of the Bighorns onto this slope right behind us," said Hogarth. "That's the one that doesn't go dry."

Waco chuckled appreciatively, indicated the two men with him. "Thought you'd like to look them over. Scarcity of beef around left a lot of good hands riding the grub line. I had a wide choice. On the Quarter Horse there is Shorthorse Simms. Other one says Dick Geddes."

Simms was a man as short and stubby as his Quarter animal, face whipped by the weather till it looked like a wrinkled beef steak. Hogarth nodded greeting.

"Use that short horse for your cow work?" he asked.

"I got my own string," said Simms. "Heeley here is only one of ten, and they're all Quarter horses. Waco said you might appreciate a man with his own tools."

Hogarth allowed his eyes to swing on Dick Geddes. The man sat a black horse with four white stockings. He didn't wear cow clothes, his suit of pin-striped serge tailored to fit broad shoulders and a narrow waist. He had a floridly handsome face with small, vivid black eyes and a neat black mustache. He wore black gloves on his hands.

"Did you bring your tools too?" Hogarth asked him, and his eyes were on the bulge of a gun beneath the man's coat.

"I can write my name with the one-eyed scribe," said the man, allowing a gloved hand to touch the bulge, "just about as well as I can rope a cow."

"And he ain't got a match when it comes to forefooting a steer, so more than one in Cody told me," grinned Waco.

"Light down," said Hogarth. "I'll put the coffee on."

After they had eaten, Hogarth apportioned the watches, giving Waco the first four hours. When the man went out to get his horse, Hogarth followed him. Waco lifted his saddle onto his horse before he spoke.

"Barefoot pony's been in that soft ground east of here," he said. "I spotted the tracks coming in."

Hogarth reached in his pocket to curl his fingers around that cherry wood fetish. "What was the name of Tremaine's Crow?"

"Kasna," said Waco. "You think Tremaine's put him to watching us?"

"It's a possibility," said Hogarth.

Waco turned his head to look at him. "You don't take to Geddes, do you?"

"Where did you pick him up?" said Hogarth.

"Found both of them in Cody," muttered Waco. "Like I said, the freeze left a lot of hands without jobs. The town was full of them. I asked around pretty careful. Geddes has a rep. I thought with things stacking up the way they are you might need a man who could do other things besides working cattle."

"We'll see," said Hogarth.

"It's none of my business, of course," mumbled Waco, "but where do you plan to get forty dollars apiece for these busters come end of this month? I have exactly two Mex dollars to my name and I know you ain't got any more."

Hogarth put his hand on the man's back. "There are ways, Waco. We've got a foothold on the range now. My next move

is the town. I think the woman has strings I might use."

"Be careful, Bobby boy."

"Did you ever see one before I couldn't handle, Waco?" said Hogarth. "Now be careful tonight. Don't show yourself too much and keep that saddle-gun handy. I don't like those barefoot tracks too much."

THE rest of that week was spent in work. Hogarth put Shorthorn and Geddes to digging fence holes during the day, and sinking the posts, even though there was no wire. Saturday evening he let the two men go into town according to custom. He gave them fifteen minutes start, then, leaving Waco at the spread, got his skewbald and followed. He did not take the road, but hit it fast down Medicine Wheel Creek to where the Meeteetse road crossed it on a wooden bridge. He was in the willows of the bottoms when Shorthorn and Geddes clattered across the bridge. They were not speaking.

Meeteetse's lights held a saffron tint in the spring night. There were only two saloons. Halting his horse outside town, Hogarth watched Shorthorn and Geddes dismount before the Bullhorn. He got off and loosened the girth on his saddle and hunkered down in the shrill talk of crickets.

In about forty-five minutes, Dick Geddes came out alone and mounted his black, turning it south out of town. Hogarth tugged his latigo tight again and swung on to follow. He stayed off the road, trailing the man through brushy sections and grassy meadowland. Finally the open range gave way to a snake fence along the road. At a gate, Geddes turned down a wagon track leading through poplars to where the lights of a house peered through the trees. Hogarth let him reach the house, then followed. There was a sign nailed to one of the gateposts. TEE BROOM RANCH, it said, GEORGE A. CHAPEL.

It was a tall hiproofed Wyoming house with a stone porch extending the length of the two wings. There was a spring buggy standing to one side of the steps, and Geddes' black at the hitchrack. Hogarth had meant to hitch his horse, but on his approach, a movement drew his attention to the porch.

"George?" asked a man, from the darkness there.

Hogarth climbed off, dropping his reins. "No, Geddes," he said, and started up the flagstone steps.

Geddes made a startled, spasmodic movement forward that brought him from the deep shadow next to the doorway, and Hogarth saw the motion his hand made. Hogarth hadn't meant to do it this way, but he leaped forward bodily, one hand out to catch Geddes' right wrist before the man could draw his gun, the other hand pulling his own. Hogarth's leap carried Geddes back against the door. The whole portal shuddered. Hogarth's grip on Geddes' wrist pointed the man's gun toward the floor when it went off. There was the scream of ricochet against the stones. Then, still holding that wrist, Hogarth had his own gun out.

He whipped the man across the face with it. Geddes screamed and dropped his gun.

"Templeton?" shouted someone from the inside.

Hogarth brought his gun back from the other direction, whipping the man across the other side of his face. Geddes had been sagging against the door. He made a small, choked sound, and slip down. Hogarth released him, stepping back. The door was flung open from the inside, and Geddes fell on into the room, hands over his face, to lie there moaning sickly at George Chapel's feet.

"There's your spy, Chapel," said Hogarth. "I'm glad it came out this way. It gives you a good idea of what *you'll* look like the next time you try something like this."

Chapel's pale face raised to him. Hogarth could see that the man was trembling visibly. The scrape of boots on the steps behind Hogarth wheeled him that way. A big rawboned man was coming up the steps with a gun half-drawn.

"No, Templeton," said Chapel.

"That's right, Templeton," said a feminine voice from behind Chapel. "You'd be stepping on a wilder bronc than this country ever saw before. I don't think you'd get off him whole."

Templeton stopped halfway up the steps, the extended wings of his old barrel-leg chaps settling with a leathery sigh about

his legs at the cessation of movement. His mouth was open. He blinked his eyes. Then he let go his gun and it slid back into the holster. Hogarth took one look at the woman in the doorway.

It was Kerry Arnold, her red hair piled in a high coif on her superb head, a sheath-like bodice of satin revealing the fullness of her upper body, a blue taffeta skirt whispering in rich, heavy folds from her slim waist. She let her glance pass from Hogarth to George Chapel, and though the wide, candid appraisal of her eyes did not change, her tone held a faint disgust.

"I didn't think you capable of that, George. I'm sorry."

She turned into the house, and Hogarth moved unhurriedly past Templeton, putting his gun away. Geddes was still lying on the floor, covering his face, when Hogarth mounted his horse and turned down the road. He was out the gate and on toward Meeteetse when he heard the rattle of a rig behind him. He pulled aside, and the springy buggy came abreast.

"Hitch your horse behind and step in," said Kerry, from the seat. At his hesitation, she leaned toward him. "I hope you don't think I was in on that."

HE SHRUGGED and tied his horse to a brace at the rear, climbing up onto the seat. She clucked her tongue, and the team of spirited bays took out. When she had them in an even trot, she sent Hogarth a sidelong glance.

"You said you were glad it came out that way. Does that mean you hadn't intended doing anything to Geddes."

"He drew it on himself," said Hogarth. "You know the way I feel."

She laughed indulgently. "At least the way you told the Trygvessons you feel. You weren't really appealing to their intelligence the other day in town, were you?"

"They're too slow for that," said Hogarth.

"But you made it appear you were, and stacked it up so Sigrod couldn't put his hands on you without insulting his own son, and Rane couldn't carry it on without seeming childish." That indulgent chuckle shook her again. "Everything so neat. Leaving just at the right time. A moment sooner or a moment later wouldn't have been any good. If you'd waited a little longer Rane's anger might have carried him on in anyway. As it was all of them were so confused they didn't know how to move. After you'd left, and it finally reached Sigrod how you'd played them off against each other, he was in such a rage he wrecked every stick of furniture in the Bullhorn Saloon." She sobered abruptly, eyes on his face. "That didn't end it with them, though, Hogarth."

"I know it," he said. "The time will come, sooner or later. That just wasn't it."

"You'll have to meet the whole bunch of them someday." She shivered. "It makes me feel cold."

"I'm surprised you should feel anything, for me."

She looked up in mild surprise. Perhaps it was the expression on her face, or the way she had spoken. He sensed suddenly that it would not be her intellect he dealt with this evening. Maybe the night brought that out in a woman, or maybe the greater femininity of costume influenced her mood. He didn't know. All he knew was it would not be her intellect he dealt with this evening, and a faint smile curled his lip.

"What's amusing?" she said.

"Nothing particularly." They had come to a rise in the road that overlooked Meeteetse, and he pulled up, draping the reins around the nodding whipstock. "Do you like views."

"I often stop here in the evening." Her voice was husky.

"With George?" he said, and when she raised her chin in that faint, defiant surprise, it put her in the correct position. Her ribs lifted against him with the sharp breath, and he felt the stiffening resistance in her body. But his hard arms pulled her to him with a force she could not meet, and then his lips were on hers and he felt the resistance leave her in a weak little wave.

He had known there would be this richness in her. He drank it in through her soft, moist lips with a thirst that surprised even him. When he finally drew his face away, she remained bent like a bow in his arms, her head thrown back, her eyes closed. She took a deep, shuddering breath, at last, and opened them.

"You really take what you want, don't you?" she said.

"I guess so, Kerry," he said. "The first time I laid eyes on this land up here I realized I'd wanted it. All my trails, all my travels, I never saw range I wanted like this. And the first time I laid eyes on you it was the same way. I won't say there haven't been other women. I won't even try to say you're different. Just more, Kerry, more than I ever dreamed could be . . ."

His words trailed off as he kissed her again, and when that was over, she buried her face against his chest. "You're different, Hogarth, so different than these crude, shy, cowmen, Hogarth—"

"Like Chapel?"

She shrugged. "He's the best of the lot. And he doesn't even know how to hold a girl's hand right. A woman needs something more than that, Hogarth, a woman needs . . ."

"A woman needs the right man. "That's all she needs. I knew it was right with us the first time I saw you, Kerry. Don't you know it, now?"

Her eyes were turned up to him, and it was the first time he had seen indecision in them. "As a man, yes, Hogarth. But this other, the way you came in here, your methods. Under other circumstances they wouldn't hold such a big significance. Maybe I've been associated with the co-op too long. You get close to people that way. We've been so successful, so free of the trouble and strife that has swept other sections of the State, with the constant battle between the big operators and the small."

"You take the attitude that my coming will change all that," he said.

"I'm not blind, Hogarth," she said. "Even in love."

"You don't seem to see what I'm after in a very clear light," he said.

"You've taken advantage of every situation you've met—"

"Only to establish myself, beautiful. It took a certain amount of expedience to step in. Granted I'm ambitious. I always have been. But it's not as destructive as all that. If I had a chance to step in on an open range I would have ridden every horse I could to become the biggest operator there. If that isn't how things stack up on your closed pasture here I'm willing to accept that. There are just as many ways of becoming big here within the co-operative. The harder each of you works the greater the co-operative profits, isn't that so."

"Yes," she said. "But you aren't in the co—"

"Don't play dumb, Kerry," he said. "You know what that fifth clause was. Karnes crossed a lot of pretty trails up in there, but I've been unraveling Indian sign since I was a kid. It amounts to the fact that by my signature on that contract, I not only bought the land, but joined the co-operative. How did you think that would block me?"

SHE shrugged, face still against his chest. "I don't know, Hogarth. None of us knew exactly what you meant to do. We could just see how fast you moved in, and there were so many possibilities. Even a rumor that you were an agent from the big Johnston County operators. They've tried to crack us before. As long as you're in the co-op, your signature on the contract prevents you from having more than the four thousand acres allotted the other members of the co-operative. Karnes thought that and the other legal restrictions involved would keep you from causing us trouble. Karnes didn't want to tell you till you made a false move. Then he planned to pop it."

"So you pulled a lot of legal double-shuffle to put me in a position I would have accepted anyway," he said. "And now I belong to the co-operative and whatever I do you profit by, Kerry. That's what I'm trying to show you."

She looked up at him with a new calculation in her eye. "Maybe you're right. Maybe we've coasted long enough up here. We've never had a really strong man, Hogarth . . ."

"George Chapel's signature on that contract I signed was as Secretary and Treasurer of the association," he said. "Is he in love with you, Kerry?"

"I suppose so," she said.

"You've got enough cattle for this year's drive," he said. "But you've bled your outfits of even brood stock. What about next year?"

She shook her head. "I'm . . . I'm

afraid to even think of it. There'll be a way. There must be."

"There's still some cattle down around Cheyenne," he said. "Some of the trail men were willing to accept the doubtful credit of bankrupt operators, but there were others like me who couldn't see it that way, and they haven't started back yet. A quick move could pick up several thousand head."

"We have no cash, Hogarth," she said emphatically. "Even when we get that government check it wouldn't be enough for more than a thousand head at the present market."

"Time you get the government money those cattle in Cheyenne will be gone," said Hogarth. "You wouldn't have to put up the whole amount. They're in such a position that they'd take half on speculation. Those trail herders wouldn't consider full credit, but five dollars a head down and a promissory for the rest from a reputable association like the Basin Co-op would swing it. Most of them in Cheyenne now are from Texas. I've got the connections. If I could send Waco down there with a check for five thousand—"

"But we don't have any funds," she repeated almost angrily.

"Time that check is sent through and comes back to the Cody National you'll have the cash deposited from the government check," he said.

She tried to pull away from him. "Isn't that trail getting pretty shady, Hogarth."

"Speculation, Kerry," he said. "You stand or fall by it now. You've got to. What's the use of hanging on if you don't have any cattle for next year, not even any brood stock?"

"And what if our trail herd doesn't reach the reservations? There are a dozen things that could happen. If the Indians are restless up there it even makes it a greater chance."

"They won't bother their own beef," he said. "Of course it's a chance. But the bigger the chance, the bigger the rewards."

A faint flush crept up the milky line of her neck. She drew a little breath.

"The others wouldn't see it."

"They wouldn't have to," he said. "Only the man who signs the check for the association. And . . ." he paused momentarily, that irony in the faint upward twist of his lips . . . "George is in love with you, isn't he?"

"Hogarth," she said, stiffening, "what are you suggesting?"

IV

THERE was something ominous about the husky cry of a saw-whet owl somewhere up in higher timber. The unshod tracks led from bright sunlight into deep shade beneath a spruce. In the sudden chill, Hogarth pulled his skewbald up.

"What's the matter?" said Waco.

"I don't know." Hogarth sat tensely on his pony, straining to see down the heavily shadowed lanes of pine above them. "I feel funny somehow. What do you make of that owl?"

"Sounds like he's honing a saw," grinned Waco.

"They say timber Indians use bird sounds to signal each other," Hogarth muttered.

"Take it easy, Bobby," Waco told him. "I ain't never seen you so nervous. Making love to that Arnold filly last night really put your teeth on edge, didn't it?"

"No." Hogarth shook his head, glancing at the tracks again. They had followed them since early morning, when Hogarth, taking over the watch from Shorthorse, had discovered the unshod pony tracks in the bottoms of Medicine Wheel Creek, mixing with the tracks of a dozen cattle. The rider had driven the beef due east into the Big Horns.

With an abrupt decision, Hogarth moved his skewbald into a plodding walk again, leaning forward to balance his weight for the laboring little beast as it drove up the steep slope. Waco's rig creaked behind. Hogarth halted again just beneath the ridge and stepped down to avoid skylighting himself before he saw what lay beyond.

"Hand me your dream book before you take a gander," said Waco, hooking one long leg around his saddle horn. "I'm plumb out of coffin nail construction."

Hogarth's own tension stabbed him with a small, reasonless irritation at Waco's habitual unconcern. He fished for a pack of cigarette papers in the pocket of his levis and tossed them to the lanky man. Then he moved to the crest. They weren't

above timberline and he took advantage of the stunted spruce, squatting down behind one to scan the slope dropping away from him into the valley beyond. Movement in the juniper down there was the first thing to catch his eye . . . Then the rider came into view.

"Here's one," said Hogarth.

He heard Waco's big dun grunt heavily as the man swung off. Waco slipped the cigarette papers back into Hogarth's pocket as he squatted beside him. He scratched a match on a tree and put it to the fag he had built, cupping his hands and peering over them at the man below. Then he shook the burning match out and emitted a streamer of smoke with the words.

"Looks like Georgie Chapel is on a trail of his own."

The man was riding bent to one side in his saddle, scanning the ground, and he came on up the slope that way. He was almost to the ridge when Hogarth rose. Chapel straightened with a jerk. One hand dipped toward the butt of a saddle gun but the fingers stopped just above the dark oak stock. He emitted a rueful little breath.

"I might have known it would have been you."

"I don't fork a barefoot horse, George," said Hogarth.

A vertical furrow formed in the man's brow. His grey glance dropped to the ground again. Hogarth shifted so he could see the tracks Chapel had been following.

"How many they cut out?" said Hogarth.

"Couple of dozen," Chapel told him, head raising in that dim, puzzled way again.

"They hooked about a dozen from me," said Hogarth.

"From you—?"

"How long this been going on, George?" he said.

"It's happened before," the man told him. "Where in hell did you get any beef?"

"Not from you, George," said Hogarth. "The others suffered any?"

"Yes, of course, about twenty of Jack Tremaine's Big Bit stuff was run off just last week—"

"All done on a barefoot horse," said Hogarth.

Chapel bent forward. "Look here, Hogarth—"

"Let's forget what happened last night, George," said Hogarth. "Let's subordinate our personal difference to the common danger. This seems to affect us all. It isn't ordinary rustling. It strikes me as being systematic. It strikes me as having more significance than the usual long riding. Maybe we can find out together."

HE WENT back to get on his horse, Waco following. Chapel came over the ridge, his hand still in the vicinity of the saddle gun. Studying Chapel, Hogarth wondered—

"What are you looking at?" snapped Chapel.

"Nothing." Hogarth's faint smile drew the skin taut across the hard planes of his face.

"Look here, Hogarth, about last night." Chapel bent forward in his saddle. "I can't forget it. There's something I've got to know. Did Kerry . . . was it Kerry who . . ."

He trailed off, evidently reluctant to state it bluntly, and Hogarth finished it for him. "Who told me about Geddes?"

"Yes," said Chapel, breathing more heavily. "What is it between you and Kerry, Hogarth. I won't allow you to—"

"George," said Hogarth, tucking his chin in, "when that kind of a woman decides on a man she doesn't change her mind overnight."

Chapel straightened, digesting that, and Hogarth could almost see the palpable shift of the man's little ego to apply that favorably, though another construction might have been put on it. Chapel waved his hand, finally, in a vague gesture.

"But Geddes—"

"Karnes," said Hogarth indifferently, "rattles off at the mouth a lot," and saw that Waco's long face did not change expression appreciably. Chapel stared at Hogarth a moment. Then Hogarth could see it rising in the man. Chapel's thin chest lifted against his square denim ducking jacket with the acceleration of his breath. The fingers of that hand spread out across the oiled stock of the rifle.

"Oswald?" he said, in a small, tight voice.

Hogarth drew a weary breath. "Does it matter, now, George? If I'm willing to forget it, you should. You've got to admit

it was rather a sneaky thing, putting a spy on me that way, but your motives are understandable, in a . . ."

He trailed off, lifting his head. Maybe it was the way the wind wrinkles deepened about his eyes with their narrowing. The glowing brown pupils took on a strange, mystic lucidity, as if he were staring at something beyond a normal physical perception. Waco must have heard the sound too, now. Without a word, Hogarth turned his horse up toward the ridge. Almost at the crest, he veered northward, paralleling the ridge.

"Same direction the tracks head," muttered Waco, following him. Chapel trailed them in a tentative, puzzled way. This was a transverse hogback which drove eastward into the main north-south system of watersheds. The ridge began to rise. Hogarth's horse was on the trail before he knew he had struck it. At first he thought it was a game trace. Then he realized it was too broad for that. It struck off at a tangent from the ridge, down into a small transverse valley, then climbing steeply back up through timber toward the top of the Big Horns. A ponderous bald peak rose to their left. Hogarth could hear it distinctly now; he halted his horse to listen, staring up through the somber lanes of timber, and the other two men brought up with him.

"Musical longriders," muttered Waco.

"No." Chapel's head was tilted to one side, and there was a vague, frightened light in his grey eyes. "It's an Indian song. It sounds like some sort of Indian song."

"Wanka tan han he ya u we lo
Wanka tan han he ya u we lo
Mita we cohan topa wan la
Ka nu we he ya u we lo . . ."

IT CAME to them weird and warped on the wind. Hogarth knew a resurgence of that nameless tension he had felt before. The skewbald shifted nervously beneath him. The voice went on chanting, at a high, eerie pitch. Hogarth kicked his pony abruptly.

"Get in there while he's still singing and the sound'll cover our noise," he grunted, driving the animal hard up the steep trail.

"Bobby," hissed Waco from behind him. "It's stopped."

Hogarth pulled in the skewbald. He could no longer hear the singing. Then, magnified into an unearthly detonation by the thin air, a gunshot shocked the silence. The skewbald gave a startled scream and bolted. Hogarth's legs clamped at its barrel in the instinctive reaction of a man born to the saddle, and he even threw himself forward in automatic effort to maintain his center of balance. It would have saved him but for a twist in the trail. He was not yet fully recovered when the pony veered to follow that twist, and it threw him off to the side.

He felt himself gone, and tried to kick free. There was a moment of uninhibited fall. Then his whole body jerked to halt in midair. An instant later his head struck the ground, and through the dazed agony of that he felt the whole weight of his body jerking at his foot, and knew it was snagged in the stirrup. He had a moment of hope that the animal could not drag him very far up that steep trail. That was gone as he felt the speed accelerate, rocks and roots cutting into his back and bruising his head, and knew the animal had turned off the trail onto the slope. It was so steep the pony immediately slid onto its haunches, squealing insanely. Hogarth kicked crazily at the stirrup, trying to tear free, his body twisted over and over as they gained speed down that slope, knowing any moment that horse might roll onto him.

More shots from above. Then Waco Williams loomed up beside Hogarth on his horse. The man must have put his dun off onto that slope at full gallop, and any moment it would go headlong. It took uncanny timing.

The dun came in beside the skewbald and for that instant Hogarth was sliding down between the two horses, the dun still on its feet, the skewbald already in a sliding rolling descent.

With both hands free and knowing he would only have that moment to act before he too went out of the saddle on a rolling horse, Wac leaned down on the inside, grasping the stirrup on Hogarth's rig with one hand, Hogarth's foot with the other. Waco got in one tug at Hogarth's foot before the dun started losing its feet. Then all four hooves went out from beneath the frenzied whinneying beast, and Waco threw himself off on the inside, still hanging on to that stirrup, giving another vi-

cious tug at Hogarth's foot while he was in midair.

He came down on top of Hogarth and the two of them crashed on down the slope. Hogarth heard his own air expel in a grunt of pain. He was so dazed by the dragging now that he did not realize his foot had been freed of the stirrup till they came up against a boulder. Both horses went sliding and screaming on down the hill, crashing past a stunted juniper, an avalanche of rocks and dirt accompanying them.

Hogarth heard himself groaning as from far away. It seemed as if he were being lifted out of a murky well. After hearing, came feeling. Pain splitting his skull. A wrenched throbbing agony pervading his right leg. The stinging abrasion of his torn, wounded back.

"You all right, Bobby?"

Hogarth shook his head, rose to one elbow. Waco sprawled beside him across the hoary brown moss on the boulder, a grin on his bleeding face. Hogarth glanced down the slope, to where the skewbald had finally brought up against a warped juniper, lying there in a twisted, broken heap. The dun had missed the spread of timber and must have gone on down the steepening slope. It was nowhere in sight. Then Hogarth looked back up the hill to the trail far above where Waco had deliberately driven the dun over after Hogarth. Finally he looked back at Waco.

"Thanks," he said simply.

"Done the same thing a million times bulldoggin' a steer," smiled Waco. "That's all it took."

"I know what it took," said Hogarth. He drew a heavy breath, looking back up at the trail. "Chapel's out of sight. I thought it was funny coming alone like that. He had a man named Templeton."

"What about the Indian?" said Waco.

Hogarth shook his head. "How do we know it was an Indian?"

"Didn't sound like no white man singing to me," said Waco.

"That trail drops down again ahead of where we went off," Hogarth told him. "No use climbing back up to it. More cover along in here and we can catch it at a lower point farther on."

They started working through rocks and scrubby brush, covering themselves as well as possible. Hogarth had to drag his leg. After a few yards he had to halt beneath another rock, panting, dizzy. Waco allowed Hogarth to recover himself, studying him.

"I didn't know it was Karnes who told you Dick Geddes was George Chapel's spy," said Waco. "I thought it was an idea of your own."

"It was," said Hogarth, shaking his head dully.

"But you let Chapel think that Karnes . . ." Waco trailed off, a strange, puzzled tension entering his long-jawed face.

Hogarth felt a dim apprehension touch him, and his head raised. "Divided we fall, Waco."

"That might work both ways, Bobby," said Waco.

"How do you mean, Waco?"

"I always figured a ranny capable of crossing one man was capable of crossing any man," said Waco.

"NOT crossing them," said Hogarth. "There just has to be a wedge to use. If Chapel has a temper and we can use it as a wedge between him and Karnes—" He stopped, only then realizing the full implications of what Waco had said. He stared at the man. "You don't really think that, Waco," he said finally, "do you?"

"I never thought of it before, in connection with you and me, Bobby," said Waco. "I been with you now long enough to know how sharp your edge is. But no matter how quick you changed leads in the past, you always kept your hooves clean. You never gave me cause to ask myself a question like that."

"But what possible reason could I have for—"

"Who knows?" said Waco. "One might come along."

"When men get to talking like this, Waco," said Hogarth, meeting his eyes, "it's time to end the roundup."

"Let's pull up stakes," said Waco with an impulsiveness foreign to him, clutching Hogarth's arm. "Let's saddle up and hit the trail, Bobby. This isn't a good pasture. The grass looks green but it's rotten. It'll kill the stock, Bobby—"

Hogarth shook his head. "You know how long I've been trying for a spot like this. We're in now, Waco. I'm not throwing aces like this away."

Waco studied him a moment, shrugged heavily. "All right, Bobby. We better shift here, then. That rifle is still around somewhere."

Hogarth started crawling to the next cover, and it wasn't his leg dragging him down now. He had a strange empty feeling at the pit of his stomach.

The trail reached its peak and then started dropping down toward them. They rounded a shoulder of the slope to see that it passed them, going on down into a broad meadow. Hogarth crawled into a motte of stunted spruce, staring at what lay in the meadow. That same tension he had felt before started forming once more. Waco crawled in beside him, and his mouth opened slightly as he saw what Hogarth was looking at.

"What is it?" he whispered.

Hogarth shook his head, not able to answer. In the meadow below them was a gigantic wheel of limestone slabs and boulders, fully a hundred feet across. The hub was a circular stone mound, worn smooth and gleaming either by human fashioning or ages of weathering. From this radiated spokes made up of the slabs. At the end of some of the spokes were what looked like shelters built of stone. On the top of one of these shelters was a bleached buffalo skull. Hogarth could not understand that ineffable awe it produced in him.

"Remember Pecos?" said Waco.

"This doesn't look like any pueblo ruin," said Hogarth. "Make you feel funny?"

Waco nodded vaguely. "Looks like someone built a fire in front of that building with the buffalo skull on top. Maybe where the singing was coming from?"

Hogarth felt his body grow rigid. A man had appeared suddenly from behind one of the stone buildings on the far side, near the lower end of the slightly sloping meadow.

He carried a rifle in one hand and was bent over the ground. He moved on in through the limestone slabs.

"Cover me," said Hogarth, and started down through the spruce, forgetting, in action, what had gone between him and Waco a few minutes before. He moved with the swift, efficient capacity that came with utter confidence in Waco's ability to back him to the hilt, a confidence born of the peerless, unified teamwork they had developed.

He forgot the pain of his leg in the restrained excitement of stalking the man below. He found a spot where the trees almost reached one end of a spoke in the giant wheel, and flitted from them in a soundless limping run, reaching the first limestone block to crouch there a moment, controlling his breathing carefully to listen. Finally he caught the faint crunch of a footstep.

He dodged up the line of slabs till he was about halfway to the hub, halting again. From this position he could hear the passage of the man more clearly. Evidently he was crossing between the spokes, moving this way. The wooden butt of Hogarth's Forehand & Wadsworth was smooth and comforting in his hand. He hooked his thumb around the big single-action hammer. His head lifted.

The limestone slabs forming the spokes were laid a few feet apart, and through one of these openings the man had come, three blocks down from Hogarth. He walked in a smooth, catty way with an old carbine tucked in one elbow. Hogarth allowed him to get far enough out in the open.

"All right," he said. "Just stop and drop the carbine before you turn around."

The normal man would have stiffened, probably, in surprise. This one didn't. He stopped, with no appreciable change in the feline relaxation of his body. Then he lowered the Spencer carefully to the ground, and turned around.

"Well," said Hogarth, "Kasna."

V

THE WARM spring afternoon filled the Bullhorn Saloon with its desultory sounds. Glasses clinked softly as the sleepy barman arranged them on the backbar shelf.

A Cody faro dealer's husky tone rose and fell at the rear of the room where he sat at a round deal poker table telling the Bullhorn's house man how tight the big freeze had made it in gambling circles in the county seat. The sullen trot of a horse floated in from the street.

All this impinged itself dimly on Hogarth's consciousness as he lounged in a

chair at one of the front tables, idly twirling his empty beer glass. It was two days since they had met Chapel up in the Bighorns, and Hogarth still thrust his right leg stiffly out before him. He looked up idly as a man pushed through the batwings. It was Jack Tremaine. He started toward the bar, then saw Hogarth, and turned to come over.

"Hello, Hogarth," he said. "I didn't see your horse outside."

"I'm forking that short horse at the rack," said Hogarth. "Lost my skewbald in the Bighorns day before yesterday. Didn't Kasna tell you?"

"He didn't say anything about you losing your pony," Tremaine said. "He was up there on a cold trail of some of my Big Bit stuff they ran off a couple of weeks ago. Funny thing, even Kasna can't get beyond the Medicine Wheel on those trails. The land beyond is nothing but talus and shale for miles. Hard rock might take scars, at least, but that sliding stuff is hell for a tracker to read sign in." Tremaine sat down, put his elbows on the table. "Trygvesson tried to make out you were connected with this rustling, but it was going on way before you came. Just a few here and there, steadily, systematically, all by someone on an unshod horse, always leading up as far as the Medicine Wheel and disappearing in those badlands beyond."

"Hole-in-the-wall country is over there somewhere, isn't it?" said Hogarth.

Tremaine shrugged beefy shoulders. "We've considered that possibility. Hole-in-the-wall is as much legend as it is fact. They'd have you believe every longrider from Sam Bass to Billy the Kid is in hiding there. If the cattle were being sifted through that section it would be next to suicide to go after them. No lawman will go through the Hole-in-the-wall on the eastern side, you know. As far as getting in from this end, I don't know of an entrance beyond Medicine Wheel. If anyone knows, it would be Kasna, and he can't tell me."

"Indians usually don't shoe their horses," said Hogarth. "How about Kasna?"

"No, no," Tremaine shook his head in anger, "will you get that out of your head?"

Hogarth glanced out of the window. "I can't."

"You waiting for somebody?" said Tremaine.

"Either that or trying to drink up all my beer," said the barman, who had overheard them as he came up. "This is the second day he's been here, Jack. I never saw a man hold so much beer and stay sober."

"Can't do much else with this leg," said Hogarth. "What'll it be, Tremaine?"

"Give me a glass of claret, Jeff," Tremaine told the grinning barman.

"You seem to be the authority on Indians around here, Tremaine," said Hogarth. "What kind of a thing is that stone wheel?"

"No one knows, really," said Tremaine. "The Indians have no legends or traditions to explain its origin. It must have belonged to a prehistoric race. The pattern and orientation imply sun-worship. Some men connect it with Aztecs. There are twenty-nine spokes, possibly representing the days of the lunar month. Those six buildings around the edge of the wheel are called Medicine tipis by the Crows. It has always fascinated me. Sort of gives you the creeps to see it."

HOGARTH nodded. "There was someone chanting when we came up. I can't remember the words exactly. Something like Wanka tanhan haya lo. That's what it started like anyway."

"Sounds like it might be the Lakota Song of the Sun," said Tremaine. "I've heard it at their Sun Dance ceremonies."

"Aren't the Crows connected with the Sioux way back?"

"They all belonged to the Hidatsas originally, in the Dakotas. Then one group migrated west and became what are now the Crows—" Tremaine looked up abruptly. "Hogarth, I asked you to stop ringing Kasna in on this."

"You *are* an authority on the Indians, aren't you?" said Hogarth. "And the only one in the co-operative who seems to hold no antipathy towards me. I find that strange, Jack."

"What are you driving at?" said Tremaine, flushing.

"And you're so vehement about leaving Kasna out of this—" Hogarth cut off. He

had turned to glance out the window again, in time to see the pair of riders pull up to the hitchrack across the street. Tremaine bent across the table, his face filling dark with blood, those vivid eyes flashing. He spoke tensely, his jaw clenched.

"Are you implying Kasna and I have something to do with this rustling?"

Hogarth drew a breath, starting to rise, still looking out the window. "Forget it."

"I won't," said Tremaine. "You find it strange I should have felt no antagonism toward you? At least before now. I'll tell you, Hogarth. Maybe I shouldn't, after an insult like that, but I'll tell you. The others in the co-operative take the attitude that your actions hold something dishonest, coming in like this. I don't think so. It was just a sharp game and they lost, that's all. In fact, I sort of admire you, beating them at their own game. I'm just a simple, guileless single-track, Hogarth, and I can't help admiring a man with the keen, subtle, intricate capacities you have. As simple as I am, though, I've been working on this rustling a long time, with Kasna's help, and I've found out some things—"

"I said forget it," muttered Hogarth, only half-hearing the man as he gained his feet and limped toward the door, still thinking Tremaine was reacting in anger, his usual keen concentration dissipated by anticipation of what lay outside.

"But Hogarth—"

He went out the door, ignoring Tremaine, and limped off the sidewalk and across the ruts of Main, waiting for a creaking Murphy wagon loaded with hay. He went around the end-gate so soon he brushed stray straws off onto one shoulder. Then he passed the pair of horses hitched before the Basin Building. One bore the T Broom on its rump.

The stairs creaked faintly to his ascension, though he walked on his toes. He halted with his head below the level of the second floor, listening.

The door of Oswald Karne's office was ajar, and the voices came clearly through that.

"You planted Dick Geddes in Hogarth's string?" It was Oswald Karnes' high, incredulous voice. "How in Colter's Hell did you manage that?"

"Don't try to hide it in your poke that way, Oswald," said Chapel. "I don't know how you found out, but if you told Hogarth, you must know as much as I do. I heard Waco Williams was on his way to Cody to register Hogarth's Rocker T and figured they might be looking for men up there. I wired Geddes to hit Cody and let it be known he was open to propositions. Waco's inquiries would naturally lead him to the quickest man on a gun in Wyoming, if that was one of the qualifications Waco was looking for, and I figured it was. How did you know, Oswald? Do you have strings on Geddes too?"

"Strings on Geddes?" said Oswald. "What are you talking about, George? What did you say about my telling Hogarth? I haven't seen him since that first day—"

"Or Geddes either?" Chapel's voice was rising. There was the scrape of boots against bare floor. "Listen, Oswald, I'm tired of your connivance. Ever since you first started handling the legal business for the co-operative you've surrounded your actions with such a veil of legal terminology and verbal double-shuffle none of us really knows exactly where we stand on the books. I'm through trying to cut your trail through that brush. I'm bringing up a motion the next time the board meets to have you removed as our legal advisor."

"Chapel," cried Karnes, "you have no cause for such action. Why should you possibly—"

"Are you trying to deny you exposed Geddes to Hogarth?"

"*Trying* to deny!" Karnes fairly shouted his indignance. "How could I know your connection with Geddes? Don't be a fool about this, George, can't you see what bringing that kind of a motion before the board would mean, things are in too much of a mess already, with Hogarth upsetting everything this way, we're in too precarious a position as it is—George, what are you doing?"

"You can't smoke up the issue this time, Oswald," said Chapel. "I guess you know what happened to Geddes. Hogarth thought he'd do it as a warning to me? I'm going to show him two can ride that bronc. I'm going to do to his man exactly the same thing he did to mine, and the next time he sees you, he'll know."

"George, no—"

"Hold him, Templeton," said Chapel, a

strange guttural exaltation shaking his voice.

"No, George, no," cried Oswald Karnes.

"Yes, Oswald," said Chapel.

"No, George," said Hogarth, stepping into the open door.

THE three men filled the room with a suspended animation that approached the ludicrous. Oswald Karnes was backed up against the desk with both plump hands held up in the air, little mouth open. The lanky Templeton had just grasped one of the upraised wrists, his long fingers digging into the pasty flesh, and Hogarth's voice had halted him in that attitude. George Chapel was faced toward them, his back toward Hogarth. He had just been going to draw his gun, and his elbow was bent slightly, hand not quite touching the weapon's butt.

It was Templeton who spoke first, answering the question which must have been in Chapel's mind. "His iron isn't skinned."

The words broke the spell. George Chapel began some violent whirling movement that Hogarth could not quite divine, because his concentration had to be on one or the other, and Templeton was the one facing him. Templeton released Karnes' wrist and slapped at his iron. Hogarth felt his own gun leap into his fist. His left palm flashed backward across the hammer. The gun bellowed.

"He's a fanner," screamed Templeton, spun backward into the window by the heavy slug driving through his shoulder, "he's a fanner, by God," and the motion had thrown his gun-arm out so the weapon smashed through the pane of glass as he released it.

Hogarth was already turning toward Chapel with his palm cocked, but before the man was completely within his sight, he had the vivid blinding sense of the chair before his eyes, and knew what Chapel had been doing in that whirling movement. Then the legs of the thrown chair struck him, and his left palm slapped the hammer a second time in uncontrollable reaction as he stumbled backward. He felt the gun torn aside and knew that Chapel had followed the chair. With the chair in his face, he went over backward through the door, and the furniture and George Chapel came down on him with a crushing, painful violence.

He released his gun and twisted over beneath Chapel before the man could spraddle out above him to block the movement. It rolled Chapel off him into the banister. One of the chair legs had gouged into Hogarth's eye, and the pain of it blinded him. He heard the slender supports of the banister crunch faintly, however, with Chapel's body going into them.

He sensed Chapel's attempt to rise, and writhing onto his knees, pawed blindly for the man, catching him by the front edges of his ducking jacket. One of Chapel's hands came out of nowhere, fingers raking Hogarth's face.

Gasping with stinging pain, Hogarth pulled Chapel toward him with a jerk, then shoved him backward again, putting his whole weight into it. The banister popped and crashed and sagged backward. Chapel shouted, pawing wildly at the flimsy, giving frame in a last desperate effort to retain his balance. Hogarth released the ducking jacket and rose to his feet, placing one boot against Chapel's tottering body and grunting as he heaved.

"Hogarth," screamed Chapel as the banister gave way completely, and he went through it into the stair-well. He screamed and made a heavy flopping clatter, rolling uncontrollably on down the stairs and coming to a stop on the lower landing.

Barely able to see now, Hogarth whirled at the sound behind him. Templeton was staggering through the door, one hand clutched over his wounded shoulder, his eyes on Hogarth's gun where it lay on the hall floor. Hogarth took one step to kick the gun aside. It put him out from between Templeton and the stairway. He grasped the man by his good shoulder and his belt, spinning him out into the smashed banister. Templeton went through the gap, forced to drop feet first onto the stairway below and crashing up against the opposite wall to keep from falling. Hogarth leaped to the head of the stairs.

"You want me to kick you the rest of the way down too?"

Crouched against the wall, clutching his shoulder, Templeton glanced down to where Chapel lay in a moaning, sprawled heap at the bottom. Then, turning a tense, white face back up to Hogarth, he started

backing down toward Chapel, his high heels forming a stumbling clatter against the rickety steps.

Face twisted with the agony of his gouged eye, Hogarth turned to pick up his gun. He could hear the sounds below now, where people had begun to gather in the doorway and out on the sidewalk. He stepped into Karnes' office, closing the door behind him, slipping his gun into its holster. The obese lawyer had started to come out the door but he took a shuffling, unbalanced step back into the room, staring round-eyed at Hogarth. Finally he brought forth a small, strained chuckle, and reached up to run fat fingers across the insalubrious flesh of his face.

"Nice and smooth and whole," he said, the chuckle coming out in huskier, more natural bubbles, now, "nice and fat and smooth. Not a stripe on it. What a nice feeling. Not a single little scar on it. Just like a baby's bottom. I guess I'll be remembering you whenever I feel it, Hogarth. I guess I owe that to you—"

"Don't be obligated, Oswald," said Hogarth, trying to find clarity through all that pain, because he would have to be on his toes, with a mind like the lawyer's. "A man shouldn't feel obligated to a friend, for something like that."

"A friend?" Oswald let that much puzzlement show, then tried to cover it with that husky chuckle. "But . . . but Kerry —" he cleared his throat, tugging at his string tie and turning part way to one side — "Kerry told me—ah—that fifth clause-"

Hogarth shrugged, allowing himself a faint smile. "I don't blame you for that. I was dealing pretty sharp myself at the time."

"He-he-he—" it bubbled out of the lawyer again, full and unstrained this time— "you sure were. I never saw such devious machinations outside the bar in my whole career. You should have taken to the law, Hogarth."

"Maybe I have, in a way," said Hogarth. "It seems sort of a destructive waste, Oswald, for you and I to dissipate our energies trying to circumvent one another. Think of what we could accomplish working together. Two clever men, for instance, could obviate anything like that—" he waved a thumb toward the sounds below— "happing again."

A sly light came into the lawyer's watery little eyes. "And after obviating that?"

"There are so many other things, which could be done, up here," said Hogarth.

"Oddly enough, Hogarth," said Karnes, "the same thought has been in my mind for a long time, but I lacked certain qualifications necessary to its fruition, qualifications necessary, as you so aptly put it, to obviate precisely such circumstances as just arose. You seem to possess those qualifications to an admirable degree."

"Perhaps we understand each other, then," said Hogarth.

Karnes' prodigious paunch began to quiver like sapient jelly. "Isn't it a comfortable feeling," he chuckled huskily, "when two clever men do reach an understanding," and the chuckle grew so hearty his whole frame began to shake, "isn't it a wonderfully comfortable feeling, Hogarth?"

VI

THE CHOKECHERRIES were darkening from red to black along the streambeds, and the pools were covered with fluffy cottonwood tufts that began dropping this time of year. A long-tailed chat was assaying a saucy monologue from the top of a poplar, and Hogarth kept this in his consciousness as he free-bitted the short horse up the rising course of Medicine Wheel Creek. It was four days since he had thrown Chapel downstairs at Meeteetse, and again the barefoot pony tracks had appeared on the Rocker T. This time no cattle had been run off, but something in the back of Hogarth's mind had finally driven him to follow the trail.

It had followed Medicine Wheel Creek eastward into the Big Horns, as before, and now, reaching the source of the water, Hogarth was not surprised to find the tracks cutting up toward the bald peak.

Though Hogarth missed his little skewbald, he could not deny the quality of this short horse Simms had loaned him. These animals had originally been developed to run the quarter mile, bred for their prodigiously muscled rump and quarters which gave them a jackrabbit jump on the getaway and incredible speed in the short spurts. But soon, in Texas, it had been discovered what good cattle horses they made, and now more and more of them

were being used for cutters or ropers. The animal had a nice soft mouth, and all Hogarth had to do when the chat stopped singing was lift his hand a little, and the Quarter Horse halted.

He sat there in the hole of silence the chat had left, trying to sense what had stopped the bird. A sudden crashing in the chokecherries behind him twisted Hogarth around in the saddle, hand on his gun. A shaggy brown bear broke free of the berry bushes and halted in surprise, staring at him. Then, with a disgusted snort, it turned and lumbered away. Hogarth relaxed with a wry chuckle, heeling the horse into motion on up the grade.

They passed into the higher timber and reached the same steep trail they had used that other time. Hogarth avoided it now, crossing the ridge and then turning northward on the other slope. That way he passed the small valley which held the Medicine Wheel with the ridge between. When he figured he was beyond the Whel, he recrossed the ridge. He was going in now, from the opposite side to that he had entered before. He was still in the thick stands of juniper above the Wheel when he began to hear the song. It did not surprise him, particularly — but that same, nebulous awe filled him.

"Wanka tan han he ya u we lo
Wanka tan han he ya u we lo . . ."

He moved the short horse carefully down through the timber a little farther. Then he dismounted, slipping his feet out of the stirrup and catching hold of the mane to slide off so the weight of his body in the oxbows wouldn't cause the rigging to creak. He tethered the animal to a bush and crept on down the slope.

"Mita we cohan topa wan la
Ka nu we he ya u we lo . . ."

He could see the prehistoric shrine now, with its spokes of limestone blocks. Then he saw the chanter before the hub of the wheel upon which rested that buffalo skull. The figure was crouched down, head thrown back, arms spread out to the sun above, high-pitched voice rising and falling in that monotonous, eerie chant.

"Anpe wi kin he ya u we lo
A ye ye ye yo . . ."

Hogarth felt a strange, savage affinity with the figure down there. The planes of his face took on a taut, gleaming sheen, and one corner of his thin mouth twitched slightly with the sudden impulse to break into the chant.

His whole body stiffened a little, as by a distinct effort he drew himself back to reality, and moved on down through the crimson haws, trying to feel disgusted with himself for such a childish reaction. At the edge of timber he shifted around till he reached a spoke which had its end near the trees, and by which he could approach from the back of the chanter. Then he began working in toward the figure.

As he drew near, and the voice became louder and louder in his ears, something about its tone began to bother him. Familiarity? He could not tell. All he could see was the onyx gleam of braided black hair falling down the back of a white doeskin shirt. Then he was close enough to see how small the hands were, raised toward the sun, and to recognize that strange high tone in the voice, and to understand what had bothered him. At this moment of realization, he must have made some small sound, for the chant stopped, and the figure whirled toward him, and the conclusion he had reached an instant before was proved by the face twisted in surprise—the face of a girl!

"Wakan Tanka," she screamed shrilly, and whirled back to scoop at something beside her. He drove himself toward her, seeing it was an old Sharps buffalo gun she had gone for, and in the last moment, threw himself bodily into the air to reach her before she could spin around with it. He went into her while she was wheeling toward him, one hand knocking the .50 calibre weapon aside. The Sharps deafened Hogarth with its explosion. She fell before his catapulting body and he went down on top of her, the two of them rolling over into the stone structure she had been crouched before. The loose limestone blocks shuddered to their weight, and the buffalo skull rolled off on top of them.

SCREAMING at him like a cat, she tried to writhe from beneath Hogarth, clawing at his face and beating him about the back. He finally managed to catch her raking hands, gasping with the animal strength in her supple, straining body, and

shifted his own body to pin her down. She subsided at last, breast heaving with the hoarse breath passing through her, head thrown back. Her braided hair was matted and dirty and her face was smudged with charcoal on one side, two blotches of vermillion paint covering her cheeks, and the dirty white dress of doeskin she wore reeked of horses and food and sweat.

"Can'l wanka," she kept spitting at him, a new spasm of resistance stiffening her body every moment or so.

He had to grin, suddenly. "I wish I knew what that meant," he said. "It sounds pretty bad, the way you say it."

"It means coward," she hissed. "It means coward like no English word could ever mean it. It is the worst name I can think of for you—"

She broke off, as if unable to think of anything else, and his surprise at her English prevented him from realizing what she was doing for a moment. Then he felt the spasmodic movement of her chest against him.

"Take it easy," he said, rising up off her. "Don't cry. I had to jump you that way or you would have smoked me down—"

"I'm not crying," she told him bitterly. "A Lakota doesn't cry..."

It reached him, now, how young she really was, and he released her, sitting back on his haunches. She swept a doeskin sleeve across her eyes. Her mouth twitched a little with effort at control.

"It's been you cutting out all these cattle?" he said incredulously.

"Cutting out?" she asked sullenly.

"Rustling," he told her. "Stealing."

She waved her arm defiantly at a carcass thrown against one of the limestone blocks.

It had been butchered, and strips of loin and brisket were spread out in the sun atop the rock, and a chunk of rump was roasting on a spit over the fire she had built.

"That's all I took," she said. "I had to save my ammunition to protect myself from the white men, so I couldn't hunt. If it's your cow, I don't care."

"But those others,' he said. "The rustling that's been going on around here." She shrugged sullenly, without answering. He controlled his anger, leaning toward her abruptly. "What kind of horse you got?"

"He's up there." She waved an arm at the timer. "He's spotted."

"A paint?" he said. "Then that was you trying to cut Gotch out of our herd when we first hit here."

"The cow with the twisted horn?" she said, and jerked her arm toward the carcass again. "For the same reason."

He pulled the cylindrical case of cherry wood from his pocket, holding it out. "You dropped this when you took that spill off your horse."

"Wotahe," she cried, clutching at it. She pulled it to her, stifling the momentary joy beneath that sullen defiance again. "It's my bird man. The boys carry other charms. It protects us from harm."

A small grin touched his lips. He ran his thumb across his teeth in that absent-minded speculative gesture, studying her. "What do they call you?"

"Wastewin," she said. "I guess you'd say it meant Pretty Face."

"Well, Pretty Face," he muttered, "where did you get your English?"

"They had a mission school at Pine Ridge Agency."

"You're a little south of your pasture, aren't you?" he asked.

Her whole slim body grew rigid and her face darkened with a strange, new, bitter rage that shook her voice hoarsely. "There is no agency now. There is no tribe. Crazy Horse was murdered at Fort Robinson. My whole family was killed at Wounded Knee. A hundred other Ghost Dancers were killed there. The Lakotas are scattered all over the Big Horns now."

He moved a thumb toward the buffalo skull. "This some sort of war dance you been pulling here?"

"The Song of the Sun," she said. "The braves are dead or fighting now. They cannot perform the Sun Dance. Someone must do it. I prayed to Wakan Tanka that we would find freedom."

Her head was tilted down, and the way she kept watching him from beneath heavy black brows, he had the sense she was waiting for a chance to bolt. Then her head lifted, and her big black eyes widened at something beyond him. He shifted carefully, keeping her within his vision as he turned to see a pair of riders coming in from the lower end of the valley. They were great blonde men on ponderous white

stallions. With a small, hollow nausea at the pit of his groin, Hogarth rose to his feet. It always gave him that feeling to see the Trygvessons. There was an insidious imminence to their appearance. Well, he had said it himself. That had not ended it back in Meeteetse, it had only put it off...

"One of the longriders?" said Are Trygvesson, halting his stallion about twenty feet before Hogarth. He was the youngest, Are, and it showed in the peach-colored down on his smooth pink cheek, and in the palpable effort he made to lower his voice to match his father's boreal rumble.

Hogarth said, "She's one of the Pine Ridge Oglalas. The bronc's boiled over up there and the Sioux are on the warpath."

THERE was a certain perceptive flash in Otherre's eye that gave him the sense of possessing a quicker intelligence than the rest of his family, and perhaps he realized better than Are what that could mean to them, for a brooding expression crossed his lithic features. He shifted restlessly in the saddle, reaching his right hand up to rub at his weathered cheek; the knuckles were swollen and scarred from some former breakage, and the myriad rope burns on his thick fingers gave them a brutal competence.

"That doesn't mean she hasn't been the one cutting out our stock," he muttered. "We just followed another bunch driven by a barefoot horse. It led us right here again."

"You don't see them around, do you?" asked Hogarth.

All of the Trygvessons rode those imported Texas Porters, and Hogarth saw the strands of hair cinching on the front girth separate with the strain as Otherre leaned forward in the saddle. "What are you doing here, Hogarth?"

"I cut some sign from my Rocker T," said Hogarth.

"We better take her to father," said Are importantly.

"You aren't taking her anywhere," said Hogarth.

Otherre reached that battered hand up again to rub his cheek absently, staring at Hogarth. Finally he allowed his great weight to regain its center of balance again. "Are's right, Hogarth. Sigrod wouldn't want us to come back without her. She must have some connection with the rustling, and my father is in a great rage about it. I think you'd better let us take her."

"And work her over maybe if she didn't talk soon enough."

Otherre had more control than his kin, too; the faint stiffening of his rope-marked fingers against his cheek was the only sign he gave. "The Trygvessons know how to treat a woman, Hogarth."

"That's what I'm afraid of," said Hogarth. "You aren't taking her, Otherre."

The girl had risen behind Hogarth now, and from the tail of his eye he could see her willowy young figure lift up in a defiant way. "You don't have to protect me. I can take care of myself."

Are put a heel into his stallion, and it began to shift away from them toward the side. Something flat entered Hogarth's voice.

"Don't move that Oregon puddin' foot unless it's back the way you came, son," he said.

Are flushed at the word, but halted the animal, and his blue eyes dropped involuntarily to the Forehand and Wadsworth in its slick black holster on Hogarth's leg. Otherre was looking at it too. Hogarth had taken that into consideration. Those heavy hands hadn't been formed for that kind of work. They would not choose it unless they were forced.

"A fanner, they said," Otherre murmured, his eyes still on the gun.

"Word gets around pretty quick," said Hogarth,

"We were in town yesterday," said Otherre. "They're still talking about it in the Bullhorn. Templeton had a pretty good rating."

"Too bad it spoiled his record," said Hogarth. "But at least it shows you how things stand. It's like I told your brother. Unless you want to test your rating too, the only way you better move is back the way you came. Now which will it be?"

THE dusty afternoon silence of Meeteetsee held a haunted portent. Hogarth pulled his short horse into the rack before the Big Horn building. Kerry's roan was there, and Geddes' stockinged black. Hogarth climbed off his own mount, still gripping the loose end of the rawhide hacka-

more by which he had led Wastewin's gaunted little pinto in. The girl slid off sullently, staring about her with that turned-down head.

"What's wrong?" she said.

Knotting the hackamore to the rack, Hogarth stared up the empty street. A small whirlwind lifted a miniature cyclone of dust out of the ruts and fluttered it over against the curb and dropped it there. It was the only movement.

"I don't know," said Hogarth, turning to take her arm, "come on now."

She pulled away, eyes hot, "Didn't I give my word I wouldnt try to escape again?"

"All right," he said, rubbing the abrasions on his face where he had fallen through some shale while chasing her the first time she had tried to get away. "It's upstairs."

He had just stepped onto the curb when the man appeared in the doorway of the stairs. Both of them stopped like that, staring at each other. A horse snorted softly. Finally the man allowed a faint, mocking grin to spread his lips across handsome white teeth, and his eyes dropped to Hogarth's gun.

"A fanner," he said, and chuckled almost inaudibly. "A fanner."

"That's right, Geddes," said Hogarth.

Geddes' gloved hand lifted and the tip of one slim black finger delicately touched the ugly scar crossing his left cheek. He took one careful step out, and one careful step aside, leaving the doorway clear. The grin was still on his face. It held no humor.

"We'll have to see, sometime, Hogarth," he said.

"Any time," said Hogarth, indicating that Wastewin precede him into the stairway. Then he followed her, his eyes keeping Geddes in a sidelong glance till he was inside. The stairs made hollow protest to his boots. He opened the door of Oswald Karnes' office without knocking. Kerry Arnold was standing by the window. The pane was still broken where Templeton's gun had gone through.

"What was Geddes doing up here?" asked Hogarth.

"Looking for Oswald," said Kerry. Her plucked brow raised at the sight of the Indian girl. "What have we here?"

"I found her up at the Medicine Wheel,' he said. The contrast between the two women was so great that the smooth, cool maturity of Kerry's beauty was brought home to Hogarth with more force than ever. He went over and took her hand. "We've got to help her, Kerry. Are and Otherre were there. They've got the idea she's mixed up with that rustling."

"Is she?' said Kerry coldly, glancing at Wastewin, who was standing against the wall in that obstinate defiance.

"I dont know," he said, "but we can't let the Trygvessons get hold of her. I can't keep her up at my place. I thought that you—"

"I?" said Kerry frigidly. "Why should I have any obligation to a dirty little Indian girl I never saw before.'

He could feel himself drawing up, and his voice suddenly lost the impatience it had held. "Because I'm asking you to," he said quietly.

Her tone was chill with suspicion. "What's your interest in this?"

"Mainly that she should be kept out of the Trygvesson's hands,' he said. "Speaking as a member of the co-operative, I feel sure the others would back me up in this. If she knows anything about the rustling, it would be stupid to let her go. But at least we can handle it like decent human beings. Or should we call a meeting of the board and take a vote on it," he added sarcastically.

"Oh, don't be a fool," she said, and the angry toss of her red head turned it toward the window, and stopped it there. He saw the stiffening of her slim silhouette against the broken pane. Her voice came out in a husky restraint. "It looks like your chance to keep her out of the Trygvesson's hands is coming quicker than you thought."

His long, swift steps carried him to the window. His hands gripped the sill till the knuckles gleamed. They were coming in from the north single-file, all of them hatless, that blond hair whipped in the wind along with the white manes of their lathered white stallions, the earth shaking to the drumming pound of their dead run.

"What did I tell you," said Kerry in a hissing breath. "Like a bunch of Wolfing's on a raid."

"I hit your spread first, your top screw told me you were here. They must have been on my trail and found out the same way," snapped Hogarth, whirling to her

and grabbing her elbows. "Kerry, you've got to do as I say now. I'm going to meet them in the Bullhorn. That will give you a chance to get the girl out the back end of this building. I'll tell Jeff to send his swamper to the livery stable and rout out a pair of nags for you. Don't show yourself under any circumstances."

"You'll need help, she panted. "You and Waco can't meet them alone."

"Waco's on his way to Cheyenne for those cattle," he said. "I sent him yesterday, right after you gave me the check signed by Chapel."

"Oh, no, Hogarth," she said, almost inaudibly. "No, no, not alone, you can't, not for this girl, you've played it so smart up to now, don't lose it all for this girl, it isn't the time, Hogarth, it isn't the time."

"On the contrary," he said, throwing a glance toward Wastewin, "whether it's my choosing or not, this is the time!"

VII

THAT miniature whirlwind was working again. It picked up a funnel of saffron dust on the west side of Main and pirouetted it across the twisted ruts and deposited it against the splintered curbing on the east side. But it was no longer working in silence. The plank walk shuddered to high-heeled boots. A second story window slammed up.

"What is it, Harry," called the man up there.

"The Trygvessons," shouted the man running down the walk. "They're coming in on something."

Jimmy Furgusson jumped out the door of the store, upturning a bunch of apples. They rolled off into the street with a subdued clatter. Someone shouted to Furgusson from the barbershop. It was into this hubbub that Hogarth stepped from the stairway. He halted just within, to place the Norsemen, only a block away now. Then he ran across the sidewalk to his horse, and darted across the street from behind the animal toward the Bullhorn, hoping the Trygvessons would figure he had just dismounted.

"Hogarth," roared Sigrod, his voice rumbling down the street like shattered icebergs. But Hogarth had already gained the saloon, shoving through the batwing doors. There were two cowhands at the bar, and they backed toward the rear door, a wary surprise stiffening their saddle-bound figures.

"Jeff," panted Hogarth. "Send your swamper to Gillette's Livery. Have him take two horses over behind the Big Horn Building. Don't let the Swedes see him."

"Gotcher jigger," said Jeff, his eyes round and frightened. Tearing off his apron, he ran toward the back end, shouting for the half-breed swamper. Then the unmistakable sounds of running horses being hauled to their haunches out front came through the batwings. The sidewalk clattered to the heavy passage of boots. Then the doors were flung wide to slam against the walls, and Sigrod Trygvesson came through them like a ringy bull.

"That's all," said Hogarth, and he was not wearing his mackinaw, and Sigrod stopped, with his eyes pinned to Hogarth's hand, held stiffly out to the side of that Forehand.

"Are is at the window with a shotgun, Hogarth," said Sigrod. "If you make to pull that thing, you'll get both charges. You know what we're after. Is she here?"

"What makes you want her so badly," said Hogarth.

"She's in with this rustling," said Sigrod. "What makes you so eager for her defense?"

"I figure your methods of interrogation won't suit a lady," said Hogarth.

"She's no lady," said Sigrod. "She's no better than any other longrider we catch. We'd string them up."

"That's what I thought," said Hogarth. "That's why you don't get her."

Sigrod began moving towards him, his massive shoulders swaying from side to side slightly with each deliberate, inexorable step. "Is she in here, Hogarth?"

Rane and Otherre had come in behind their father, and they spread out so Hogarth could see them both, and their intent. He felt the small beads of sweat pop out on his forehead.

"I said you don't get her," he told them quietly.

"If you've got her here, we will," said Sigrod. "You said you'd fight for a good reason, Hogarth. I hope you think this is a good reason, because by Thor you're going to fight—" and the last escaped him

in a hoarse, deafening bellow, as his prodigious frame gathered itself and erupted toward Hogarth—"Siger!"

Hogarth was standing where the cowhands had been drinking their beer, and he reached out his left hand and swept both heavy glasses off the bar at Sigrod's face. The man was coming in too fast to avoid them, and one of the glasses struck him full in the face. Sigrod shouted spasmodically with the pain, and was blinded for a moment so that he could not see the direction Hogarth took toward him, and was in no position to block it.

HOGARTH dived under Sigrod's arms and his shoulder struck the man's belly. It was like hitting a pig of galena lead. Hogarth heard his own gasp of pain. But he had calculated his position to take Sigrod off-balance, and his feet churned the floor like pistons, driving on in.

Sigrod's momentum would not allow him to be stopped by Hogarth's smaller body. It knocked him off to the side, and that momentum carried him on till he pounded into a table. Both of them went over on the upturning table, crashing to the floor in a bedlam of yells and splintering wood.

Hogarth writhed free of the welter and rolled to his feet with the blinding, catty speed he was so capable of. He was whirling to catch Sigrod coming up when he heard the hoarse shouts behind him. It did not surprise Hogarth. Perhaps Sigrod had meant Rane and Otherre to stay out of it, but the sight of battle unleashed primitive Viking emotions they could not control.

"What did I tell you," roared Sigrod, "vaer dig selv nok—"

It did not stop the two sons. Sigrod was clawing his way onto his feet up the tilting top of the overturned deal table. Hogarth caught one of its legs and crouched down to heave upward. The table went over and Sigrod fell onto his back beneath it with a shrill curse. Hogarth whirled back, catching a chair as he went and allowing his whirling motion to carry it on around in an arc at the end of his arm. He released it at the end of the arc, and the chair skidded across the floor into Otherre, taking the man's feet from beneath him. The whole room shuddered to his falling.

Hogarth was already running at Rane as if he meant to meet him upright. A savage satisfaction lit Rane's face as he saw this. But Hogarth knew what a mistake it would be to pit his inferior bulk against the man like that. In the last instant he threw himself downward, twisting to one side. Rane tried to shift away from it, but was coming too fast. Hogarth struck him across the knees with the whole side of his body. Rane went down across him, and they both slid across the floor to come against the bar.

Again it was Hogarth's speed that counted. He rolled away from the huge man and got his feet beneath him. He heard Otherre and Sigrod coming in from behind and knew this had to be good. Rane pawed at the floor for support to rise. Hogarth kicked him in the head. It knocked Rane's face into the bar with a soft thud. The man emitted a sick sound and tried to rise again. Hogarth gave him a second, vicious kick. The man made no sound this time, but still tried to come up. Hogarth lashed out a third time, with all his brutal capacity. Rane's face went into the side of the bar again, and he stayed that way.

Hogarth had already started to try and whirl away, but Otherre was coming in too fast. He felt a crushing, irresistible weight strike his body, and was carried into the bar beside Are. Hogarth screamed with the terrible pain. For a moment, he was paralyzed, and thought it had broken his back.

He felt Otherre clutch his shirt with one hand and saw him draw the free fist back, and was unable to do anything. The blow blotted out sight, but brought back sense. In agony, he found the will to move, and twisted aside from the next blow. Otherre's fist went into the mahogany, and the man shouted hoarsely.

Hogarth's shirt tore in the man's fist as he tried to twist out from beneath Otherre and the bar. He brought his knee into Otherre's groin and felt a savage satisfaction at the groan of utter pain that brought. But Otherre bellied up against him, refusing to let him get away. Hogarth's next spasmodic attempt to free himself carried them into Rane, and his feet tangled in Rane's legs, and he went down with the dazed, stubborn Otherre falling heavily on top of him.

Then, lying twisted beneath the man, Hogarth heard a crashing sound, and past

Otherre's shoulder, saw that Are had leaped through the window, glass and all, unable to contain himself any longer, and was charging toward them with the frame torn completely out of the wall and dangling around his bloody neck, the shotgun forgotten in one hand. From the other side, the floor shuddered to Sigrod's feet. In a terrible spasm, Hogarth tried to writhe from beneath Otherre's oppressive, sweating weight. But the man stubbornly held him down, gathering strength to strike again. Oh, God, thought Hogarth, here it comes, and then both Sigrod and Are were in on it, rocking the room with their hoarse Viking bellows.

"Siger, siger, siger—"

It gave him the sense of being in the middle of a pack of maddened beasts. He made one last violent effort to free himself, heaving up beneath Otherre and battering a fist again and again into the man's face. Then he sank back down beneath a wave of kicks and blows. Sight spun into a vortex of pain. Otherre's broken knuckles smashed him in the face. Sigrod's boot crushed in his ribs. Are's clawing hands gouged at his mouth. The agony whirled him faster and faster down that funnel toward the black pit at the bottom. Damn you, Kerry, he thought, if you didn't get her away, and then it was all gone.

FROM somewhere out on the flats came the drumming croak of sage hens announcing the mating season. It filled the hot morning with a drowsy monotony. Hogarth decided he would go back to sleep, and started to roll over. The stabbing pain in his side woke him completely. He lay stiffly on his back, staring up at the Louise Seize tester curving above the bed, the pale tuya wood inlaying the mahogany frame forming a rich contrast to the crimson lampas covering. His mind was too fogged to answer this. He moved his head gingerly to take in the damask hangings over the window, the rich nap of the Brussels carpeting, the brass-studded blue leather of chairs against the wall. Somebody had done all right by themselves.

"You feeling better now, honey?"

The voice turned his head farther, and he saw Kerry Arnold standing in the doorway. She was wearing that shining satin bodice and rich taffeta skirt. He knew a keen, stabbing moment of desire for her, greater than he had ever felt before, and that filled him with a sense of weakness.

"How long have I been out?" he said.

The skirt hissed softly about her movement over to him, and the bed made a muted creak as she sat down, putting a cool hand on his forehead. "Overnight. They really worked you over. Broken ribs and arm, brain concussion. They would have killed you, I think, if Tremaine and Jeff hadn't stopped them."

"Who got Tremaine?" he said.

"I did," she said, and at the look on his face, her voice grew hot. "Hogarth, it was a question of one or the other. You don't think I'd let them—"

"How about the girl?" he said flatly.

Kerry shrugged. "She got away."

"Kerry—"

'I couldn't help it, Hogarth, I couldn't help it," she pled, bending over him. "It was you or her. Do you think I'd choose her, under those circumstances. I couldn't see them kill you, Hogarth . . ."

He let out his breath in a bitter resignation. "All right, all right. Where are my clothes?"

"Don't be foolish," she said. "You're good for a couple of weeks in that bed. And no arguments."

He felt too sick for arguments. The first few days passed easily enough, with Kerry there much of the time, reading to him, or talking.

When he had first made love to her in the buggy it had held as large an element of expedience as that of desire. It had been for more reason than her attraction as a woman. But now, little by little, her significance changed. He found himself studying more the refined aristocracy of her profile than the way he could use her in his plans. He began to look forward more to the clear, cool tones of her voice than to the actual ideas for strengthening their position in the co-operative which they discussed. Little by little, a need for her crept into him. She was a symbol, somehow, of something he had always wanted, she fitted so perfectly into his conception of what life could mean when a man had reached the top—a woman like that, moving through the sumptious, regal rooms of a house like this, with the green meadows spreading away beyond the pop-

lars, too full of fat sleek whitefaces to count . . .

At the end of the week, he was allowed to sit on the stone porch in the warm sun of late spring. In the afternoons, Kerry had her housekeeper serve the beer he enjoyed, and they conversed drowsily.

"Ought to be about time for Waco to come back," he told her that Saturday. "Unless he runs into trouble. You sure Chapel doesn't know Waco is the man we sent down?"

She shook her head. "I convinced George it was my idea and that the whole thing would be known only to the pair of us. I told him I had an agent of my own to send to Cheyenne.

He nodded. "That's good. I don't think he would have done it if he knew I was connected." He rose stiffly, limping across in front of her, forming clearly what was in his mind now. He turned back as she started to rise, pressed her gently down into the chair, placing a hand on either arm of the chair to bend over her. It caused him a twinge in those ribs. He kissed her, felt her whole body rise up toward him with the heavy, shuddering breath she drew. He slid his lips back to her ear, and with his cheek against hers, asked in a soft, husky voice, "if Waco gets back with a full herd, this will put the whole bunch of us in heavy feed again, won't it?"

"Yes," she murmured. "It will lift us out of the red."

"Then I'll be in a position I've never occupied before, Kerry," he whispered. I'll be able to ask you something I've been wanting to ask ever since I came, I guess. Will you marry me, Kerry?"

She was silent a moment, and then he realized she was standing, and he stepped back. She came into his arms, and he had a momentary glimpse of the dazed, misty look in her eyes, and then her face was buried against his shoulder.

"I've never known a man who knew so clearly where he was going, Hogarth, and had such infinite capacities for getting there," she said. "I've been waiting for you a long time, without knowing it. When will the wedding be?"

His laugh held a throaty triumph. "As soon as I can find a parson, Kerry—"

It was the hard clatter of hooves that broke him off, and he wheeled from her arms in a momentary anger that this moment should be spoiled that way. It was George Chapel and Templeton pulling their horses to a hard stop before the porch. The lanky man still had his shoulder in a sling and he sat his horse in a staff, bitter way, staring at Hogarth.

"Karnes sent me to get you," Chapel said to Kerry, his face set and pale with a stiff reserve. "The board's calling a meeting. Jack Tremaine has been murdered!"

VIII

MEETEETSE stirred with a subdued excitement, hitchracks lined with cowponies from the various outfits represented by the board. The four white Trygvesson stallions filled the rack before the Big Horn Building, three of the T Broom horses from Chapel's outfit across the street in front of the saloon. Chapel and Templeton drew in beside these, while Kerry drove her spring buggy into Gillette's livery next door to the Bullhorn saloon.

She helped Hogarth out, and as Gillette led the matched team back toward the other end, they had a moment alone in the cool silence.

"This is a chance, if you want it," she said, clutching Hogarth's arm. "You stacked it up so Karnes will back you, didn't you?"

"I think we can count on him," said Hogarth.

"The Trygvessons have one vote, and Chapel one," she said. "That makes two to our three. I don't know why they called the meeting. Whether they mean to elect a new president in Jack's place this time or not, I'll jump the gun and nominate you."

"Coming?" said George Chapel, appearing in the doorway.

They followed him across the street and into the Big Horn building. The first thing Hogarth saw, entering the offices of the co-operative, were the Trygvessons, standing together against the wall. Are and Otherre stood on either side of Rane in a close, possessive way, and Hogarth could see the palpable tension fill their great bodies as he entered. Are's face flushed and his tongue made a nervous flick across his lower lip. Otherre began rubbing those scored, battered knuckles with one hand.

Hogarth stopped just within the door, waiting for them to speak. Suddenly Sigrod's rumble filled the room like the first muffled shattering of submerged icebergs.

"Say hello to Hogarth, Rane," said the grizzled father. "This is Hogarth. Surely you remember him. Say hello."

At first Hogarth thought Rane was staring at him. Then he realized there was no focus in the man's eyes. They were blank and childish. His head made a faint, dazed movement.

"Vaer dig selv nok," he said mechanically.

"That is the motto of our house, Hogarth," said Sigrod, a sense of terrible, restrained savagery to his guttural voice. "It means, To yourself be sufficient. A good motto, isn't it? A good motto for a boy to remember who can't remember anything else since some Texan kicked him in the head. Just sits there and stares into the fireplace as if he could see clear back to Hardanger Fjord. And all he can say when we talk to him is this. Say it again, Rane, say it again for Hogarth."

"Vaer dig selv nok," muttered Rane emptily.

"Yes, to yourself be sufficient." Sigrod's hands began to open and close, his voice started rising. "He's sufficient to himself, isn't he, Hogarth? He doesn't need anyone now. All he has to do is sit in front of the fireplace and—"

"Sigrod, please," interrupted Oswald Karnes, waddling around from behind the long table. "You promised me." He turned deprecatingly to Hogarth. "Glad to see you up and around again, Hogarth, though it's unfortunate we have to meet under such trying circumstances. None of us can imagine who would want to murder Tremaine. He was so well liked around here. Found in his house with a bullet through the back of his head." He waved a vague, fat hand. "Ah, well. Shall we call the meeting to order."

"May I suggest your sons go outside, Sigrod," said Kerry. "You're the only proper representative of your family at this meeting."

"They have a right to hear everything that's said," muttered Sigrod thickly.

"I think Kerry's right, Sigrod," Chapel told him in a stiff voice. "I left Templeton downstairs, and the rest of the outfits are satisfied with hearing the minutes read at the general assembly."

Sigrod growled something in Norwegian, moving his great-thewed arm in a jerky gesture for his boys to leave. Otherre was still rubbing those battered knuckles as he passed. His eyes held a bleak hatred, meeting Hogarth's for an instant. Chapel shut the door behind them.

"Now we can get down to business," said Karnes. "Yes. For a matter of convenience, may I make a move that we elect a president pro-tem, and suggest myself—"

"Why pro-tem?" said Kerry. "We'll have to elect a regular officer sooner or later anyway. We're all here now. I nominate Bob Hogarth for president."

"Uh-uh-uh—" said Karnes, his puffy face lifting as if he had been slapped, but as he saw Chapel start to speak, his cunning mind grasped all the ramifications of this move, and he drowned whatever Chapel started to say with his own quick, chuckling recovery. "Of course, of course, well, Kerry, you're really riding a biscuit-cutter today, yes sireee, I think that an admirable idea, I second the motion, *and* the nomination, I think Hogarth has revealed singular capacity for such a position. I move we take a vote."

"Wait a minute—" started Chapel.

"Second the motion," said Kerry.

"Hold it—"

"All in favor of Hogarth say aye," said Karnes, breaking in on Chapel.

"Now stop your horses," shouted Chapel, standing up so abruptly he almost knocked his chair over. "You can't bull a thing like this through, Karnes—"

KARNES' face held a wonderful innocence. "Who's bulling anything through, Chapel? We observed all the formalities, didn't we? Let's not get hot under the collar. It seems to me you're the one trying to bull things through. Let's keep the meeting orderly. How about a vote on this. Mine is aye."

"Aye," said Kerry.

"No," said Chapel vehemently.

"No!" roared Trygvesson.

Karnes allowed his pudgy head to turn toward Hogarth, but Chapel started to rise again. "He can't vote for himself."

"The president of the United States has the right to vote," said Karnes. "What are

you trying to do, undermine democracy? Let's hear your word, Hogarth."

"Aye," said Hogarth.

"Then that settles it—"

"That settles nothing," snapped Chapel, rising again. "Kasna is here as a representative of Jack. He has Jack's vote in this."

Apparently Kerry had not counted on this. Hogarth saw surprise shift across her face, and then a certain vague defeat. Kasna's wooden face turned toward Trygvesson. Watching the jet eyes, Hogarth saw what might have been taken for a vague rejection turn them dull. Then they shifted to Chapel, and brightened—with an antagonism Hogarth could not miss. Finally they were on Hogarth.

"Jack always liked you," said Kasna, and paused a moment. "Aye."

Sigrod jumped to his feet, chair spinning back to crash against the wall, his great fist thumping the table so hard it knocked off the papers Chapel had been taking minutes on. "I won't stay in a co-operative with him as president," he bellowed. "If you insist on this, I'm pulling out!"

"You can't," began Karnes, "your contract—"

"To hell with the contract," shouted the man. "I'll tear it up. I'll tear it up right in your face, Karnes. If you put Hogarth in, I'm through!"

"Then I guess you're through," said Kerry quietly, from where she sat. "By vote, Hogarth is already in."

Hogarth saw the man's intent and tried to rise and kick his chair out from under him so it would not impede his draw. But those ribs were still stiff, and his bad leg buckled. He had to clutch at the table to keep from falling, and saw he could never get to his iron in time. Then the door swung open, and a lazy, dusty Texas drawl halted Sigrod's hand with his gun half-drawn.

"Pull that the rest of the way," said Waco Williams, "and I'll blow you clear back to Eric the Red!"

IX

SUMMER came with the trumpeting of rutting bulls in the swampy bottomlands along the Big Horn and the quack of ducks across the marshes and the sweet resinous scent of yellow-leaved poplars about the Big Dipper house. It was here Kerry and Hogarth had come, after their marriage.

Those first weeks with her were something out of a dream, to Hogarth, a dream of softness and richness and beauty he had held all his life. For a time, he lost sight of the plans they had been working on, forgot the precarious position he occupied in the co-operative.

It was Kerry who started prodding him, several weeks after their marriage, to start strengthening his hold on what he had obtained. Waco had been staying at the Rocker T, but the Saturday two weeks following the wedding, Hogarth invited him over to the Big Dipper. Waco did not try to hide his pleasure at seeing Hogarth again when they met on the long stone porch.

"Things been moving so fast since you got back I never rightly got a chance to thank you for saving my life there in the Basin offices," Hogarth smiled at him, seating Waco in one of the cane chairs. "I'd never gotten my iron free the way I was fumbling around. Sigrod would've blown my lamp out for good."

Waco's grin was embarrassed. "I'd just left the trail herd outside town when I heard there was a meeting called. Had a little fuss getting through the Trygvesson boys at the bottom of the stairs. Heard Sigrod bellering, figured something was popping."

Hogarth opened some beer, handed a bottle to Waco. "How would you like to rod the Big Bit for the co-operative until we decide what is to be done with it, Waco? Tremaine had no heirs, and it needs a manager. Kasna just can't seem to handle it alone."

"Which would give you, in effect, control over three outfits—your Rocker T, Kerry's Big Dipper, and the Big Bit," said Waco.

"Someone has to be appointed," said Hogarth.

"Do your plans for the Big Bit extend beyond that?" asked the man.

Hogarth pursed his lips, staring beyond Waco, but before he could answer, Kerry spoke from behind them. "Why not tell him, Bob?"

He had not been aware of her, and

twisted in his chair. "Tell him what, Kerry?"

She came around, took the third chair, smiling at Waco. "Tell him what's been in your mind concerning the Big Bit."

"What has been on my mind?"

Her smile turned indulgent. "Didn't you ever get tired of his eternal reticence, Waco? You've divided that trail herd from Cheyenne among all the members of the co-operative by now, haven't you? I see you and Shorthorse Simms have already finished putting the Rocker T on the five hundred Hogarth got. We've about finished stamping my Big Dipper on too. But one of Kasna's little inefficiencies was failing to put the Big Bit on yet. The five hundred allotted to Tremaine are still running around with nothing but that Texas road brand on." She paused a moment, studying Waco's face.

"It's about time to build the summer herd for the Indian agencies. It will leave us all in a weakened position again, without enough brood stock to give us a safe margin for next year. That trail herd didn't give any one of us quite enough for that margin. But if we could contrive it, say, that one outfit would not have to contribute its full quota to the herd for the agency, that outfit would be left in an eminently favorable position for next year, a position strengthened even more by the contrasting weakness of the other outfits."

"You mean fill up the Rocker T and Big Dipper quotas with those cattle from the Big Bit?" said Hogarth.

"Is that what was in your mind, Bob?" she said.

"Don't put words in my mouth," he said.

SOMETHING almost surprised crossed her face, and then a frigidity entered her voice. "I'm not putting anything in your mouth, or your mind, Bob. Don't try to tell me you haven't figured the possibilities. With only the road brand on those beeves allotted to the Big Bit, any brand can be slapped on for the government herd. We could make up the Big Bit's allotment out of Tremaine's original stock, with the Big Bit brand already on them. Then we could put the Rocker T on two hundred and fifty of those road-branded steers from Cheyenne, and the Big Dipper on the other two hundred and fifty."

"All of which would bleed the Big Bit dry, and be the closest thing to a sticky loop I ever heard," said Waco, rising to his feet.

"Not at all," bridled the woman. "That would leave the Rocker T and the Big Dipper enough brood stock for a substantial increase through the winter. With that increase we could replace what came from the Big Bit, next spring."

"You're rationalizing a bum deal, Kerry," said Hogarth.

She flushed. "I don't see how you can say that with the kind of deal you just pulled, sending Waco to Cheyenne with a check that didn't have any money behind it. Who was rationalizing then, calling it speculation? This sudden nobility is almost funny in the man who invited Oswald Karnes up here this afternoon to look for some loopholes in the co-op's charter whereby he could gain control of even more land. What's the matter, are you getting slow on your feet, Hogarth? Are you afraid they'd find out? It wouldn't be any different than that other deal, except that the government money came through in time to cover the check there."

"No," Waco shook his head, started toward the steps. "Whether they found out or not doesn't matter. I just can't see it. I'd rather not be included."

"I thought you were Hogarth's man," said Kerry, rising.

Waco turned slowly and there was something in the detached study of his gaze on Kerry that disturbed Hogarth. "He always let me make my own decisions," said Waco.

"Your position has changed somewhat, Waco," said Kerry. "I think you must have seen that. The way things are stacked up now, either you are his man or you aren't. Maybe you'd better reconsider."

Waco did not speak. He stared at Kerry a moment longer, the weathered lines of his angular face relaxing. He let his eyes move unhurriedly to Hogarth. They were blank and empty. Then he turned and went down the steps.

Hogarth held out an arm, starting after him. "Waco—"

"Bob!" The cutting tone of Kerry's voice stopped him.

She put a hand on his arm. "I think he's made his choice, don't you?"

Hogarth stared into her narrowed eyes, trying to define the strange emotion gathering in him. The delicate refinement of her face suddenly seemed to take a cold calculation.

"Karnes can get you a man," she said. "You'd better do it today if you want to get those cattle before Kasna starts putting the Big Bit on them."

Some guttural inarticulation formed hoarsely in his taut throat, and he moved his hand in a vague gesture toward the receding figure of Waco, staring emptily at Kerry, not yet willing to accept her casual dismissal of what had happened. He did not even turn at the footsteps behind him.

"Afternoon Kerry, Hogarth," said Oswald Karnes, puffing up onto the porch and dropping into a chair with a heavy sigh. "Hot day, isn't it? Saw your saddle mate going down the road, Hogarth. You made him foreman of the Big Bit yet?" He began fumbling with his brief case. "I brought the charter and contracts so you could see what I figured out. Each member, of course, is restricted as to the amount of land he can own personally. But the big owners are still pulling that old switch on the government under the homestead law, when they can't file on it themselves, having one of their hands take out papers on a quarter section they happen to covet, and making the land, in effect, theirs. There's nothing to prevent, for instance, Short Horse Simms taking two sections over on that strip belonging to the co-op next to your Rocker T. Then there's another stretch up—"

"Yeah, yeah," said Hogarth dimly, moving across the porch. "Talk it over with Kerry, will you, Karnes? I don't feel like business today."

Karnes' brow raised in surprise. "What's the matter, Hogarth?"

Hogarth did not answer, limping faintly down the front of the house toward the stables, but it kept echoing in his mind with a hollow, brazen clangor. What's the matter, Hogarth? He clenched his teeth, wishing he knew. That strange sensation he had felt with Kerry, something, he realized now, which had lain dormant within him almost from the first. Looking at a face which had become sharp and acquisitive, hearing a voice turned cold, seeing the subtle, deceptive shift of her mental gears—he had suddenly felt as if he were seeing himself.

He was using one of her Big Dipper horses now, a tall blood bay with the fine-boned aristocracy she liked. He heard Whitney in the corral, but somehow did not want to have her foreman saddle up for him, though it caused his ribs pain to heave the heavy corus off its peg in the tack room and carry it to the stalls. With the rig on, he stepped aboard the bay and turned it down the road after Waco. He caught up with the man about half a mile from the house.

"Waco—"

"Got everything you want now, Bobby boy, haven't you?" Waco broke in. "President of the co-op, live in a palace, married to the most beautiful woman in Wyoming, they say, control three of the best spreads in the association, money, position, cattle and more cattle—"

"Stow it in your yannigan bag, will you, Waco?" said Hogarth, bitterly. "I don't want to leave it this way. You don't have to pull that with the Big Bit beef."

"Noble of you," said Waco.

"NO." Hogarth's voice held a dim anguish. "Cut it out, will you, Waco. I know we haven't seen each other much this last month or so, and it might look like Kerry's come between us some, but that isn't the truth, it's just the first few weeks after the wedding, you understand, and we'll get back to the old basis. You know I'm not going to use the Big Bit stuff that way—"

"On the contrary," said Waco. "I think you are. Whether it was in your mind at first or not, she put it there. And whether you mean to or not now, she'll maneuver you into it, Hogarth. You're up against a big handful there. I think she's used you all along more than you realize. You thought it was your trick when you persuaded her to clinch that deal with Chapel, but look at it again. That's a woman's way, Hogarth, to make the man think it was him who figured out all the angles. I think she's figuring two for your one. She got a pretty good deal herself. She's in as favorable position as you from this marriage. You pulled a lot of chestnuts out of the fire for her."

A sharp, muscular twitch caught at Ho-

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garth's cheek, and he was staring at Waco. "You *do* resent her, don't you?"

"I won't deny that," said Waco. "That's why I'm pulling out, Hogarth, before it's too late. She was pretty close to the truth. I'm either your man, or I'm not. I want to get away before we take the next step."

Hogarth's voice was still. "What would that be?"

"What happened to Jack Tremaine, for instance," said Waco.

"What did happen to him?" said Hogarth.

"He was found shot to death in his house," said Waco. Everyone knew he felt friendly toward you. Did he buck too, when you tried to get him to rope a bum steer?" The blood drained from Hogarth's face but before he could answer Waco turned to him, meeting his gaze frankly. "We always showed each other what was in our poke, Bobby, boy. That's what's in mine. Ever get back to San Antonio, look me up."

They had reached a creek, and he turned the dun to slide it down the sandy bank into the shallows. Hogarth stared blankly after the man. The water gurgled dimly about the fetlocks of the dun. Waco's husky monotone rose above the sound.

"But one day he met a man a whole lot badder,
And now he's dead—"

The gunshot struck Hogarth's consciousness with stunning detonation, pulling him up so hard in the saddle the corresponding jerk of his hands on the reins cause the bay to rear. The animal wheeled the other way before he could pull it down. He had his gun out, firing at the blurred, moving shape in the poplars farther up the bank of the stream. Then the frenzied bay had wheeled back with its head toward the stream, and Hogarth could see Waco. The water still made that soft gurgling sound about the man's long body, stretched on its back in the shallows.

Hogarth swung off the bay and ran down the crumbling bank into the water, going to his knees beside Waco. The blood was coming from a hole in the man's narrow chest and turning to a rusty murk in the water to flow downstream. Hogarth slipped his arm beneath Waco's head. The movement opened Waco's eyes in a feeble, fluttering way. They settled on the smoking gun in Hogarth's other hand. Hogarth realized only then he was still gripping the weapon, and his gaze swung to it for a horrified instant, then back to Waco's eyes.

"No, Waco, no—"

"I get in your way, Bobby, boy?" mumbled the Texan. He tried to laugh, and choked on it. "Guess I didn't hit the trail quite soon enough. Can't say as I blame you. Man needs to hold what he has. And you have everything, haven't you, now, Bobby, boy, everything you wanted. But I wouldn't have got in your way, I wouldn't have screwed you up. I just meant to ride on out and let you do whatever you wanted, Bobby, bad, good, or indifferent . . ." A glazed look entered his eyes as he trailed off. He made an effort to focus them again. They rolled upward. That choking laugh shook him, the words coming out in a strangled prolation. *"And now he's dead, and we're none the sadder . . ."*

X

THE SLEEK hairless hide of the bay gleamed like wet blood in the saturation of sweat drawn from it by the summer heat and the hard climb. The rarified atmosphere caused its delicate nostrils to flutter with the constant suction of its labored breathing. At a halt, the slender legs trembled beneath the animal like quaking aspens. I wish to hell I had that skewbald, Hogarth thought, and then stifled it, because he would always associate Waco Williams with that pony, somehow, and Waco's death was only a week behind him, and he still knew a dull throbbing pain whenever he thought of it.

He drew a heavy breath, bending in the saddle to peer at the tracks he had been following from the Big Bit. They were of the inevitable barefoot horse, driving a couple of dozen steers from Tremaine's old outfit straight east across the river into the Big Horns. Medicine Peak thrust its shaggy head into a pale sky ahead of him. Brown needles carpeted the earth beneath the conifers, and heat clutched the silent stands of timbers in its stifling fist. He had trouble getting the bay on up the slope. The strange tension was beginning

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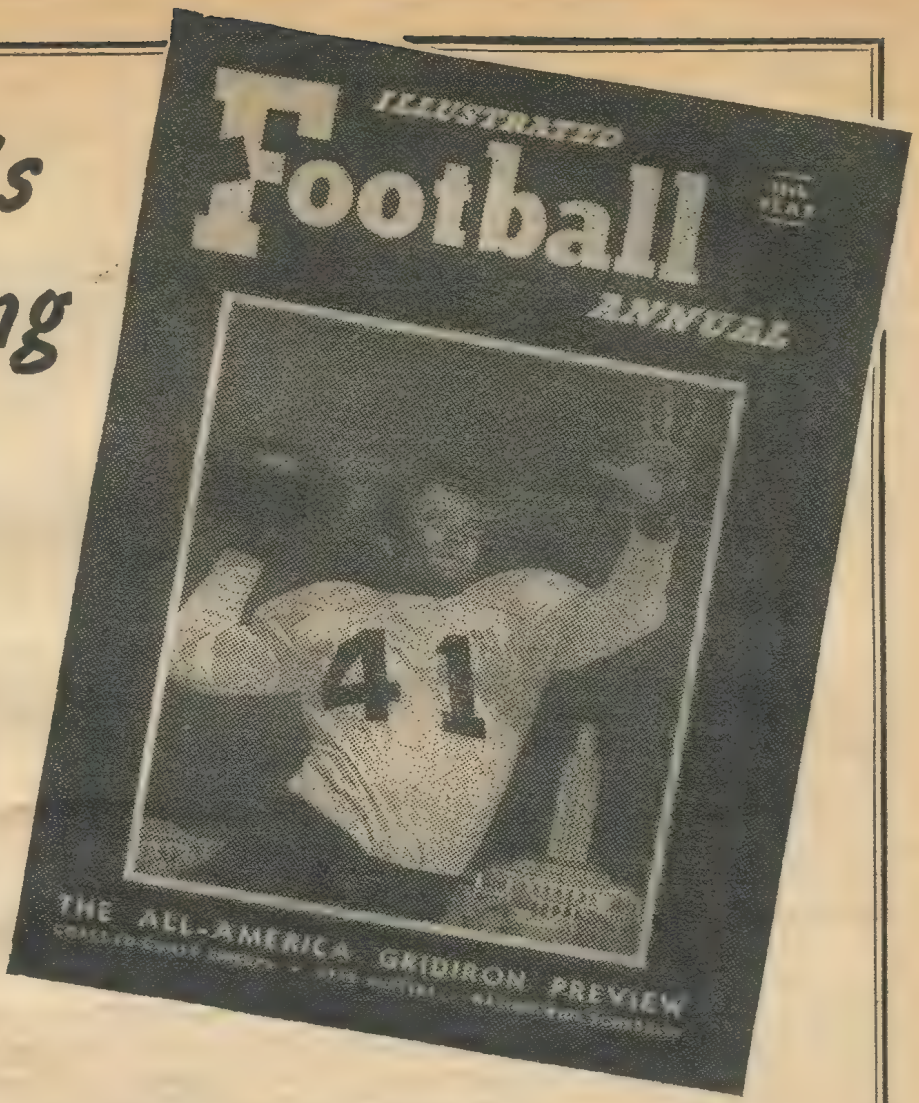

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to find its way through his other emotions now. He found his head cocked stiffly to one side, and straightened it with a snap. But in another moment it was down again, listening for that weird chant.

Nothing came, however, as he climbed on toward the crest. He lacerated himself bitterly. Why should she be there again? That was too much to expect. And why should he expect it? A dirty stinking Indian girl. He tried to drive this vindictiveness from his mind, but it would not leave. He knew part of its cause. The quarrels between him and Kerry had become increasingly violent this last week. She had opposed his tracking this new rustling, and he had left the house in anger, knowing a sense of freedom once he was in the saddle.

The bay reared in fright, almost unhorsing Hogarth, and he reined the animal brutally to one side, fighting its arching neck. Then he stared through the trees at what had startled the horse. A dead pinto lay on its side in some brambles farther up. It must have been there several days, for the buzzards and wolves had pretty well cleaned off the meat. There was enough hide left, though, to recognize the animal, and the rawhide hackamore still hitched in its grizzly, gleaming jawbone was final proof. It was tassled at one end with a black scalp-lock. He had held that same scalp lock in his hand, leading Wastewin's horse into Meeteetse.

The name crossed his mind with the fleeting touch of scudding clouds blotting out the sun. Trygvesson. Then it was gone, and the impulse it engendered was causing him to wheel the fretting bay and turn it southward from the trail he had been following. Though he had never been to the Norseman's Running Hammer spread, Kerry had mentioned its position as over the ridge and through Paintrock Gorge.

It was high noon when he topped the crest of the Big Horns. The sun was setting when he forced the flagging, hipshot bay through the chasm of Paintrock. It was soft evening when he sighted the blinking yellow lights of a sizable outfit ahead. The approach took him through a snake fence of rotting cottonwood logs and past several hog-tight corrals. The last pen was filled with the gleaming shift of white horses.

He hitched the bay behind the outhouse beside this pen and went the rest of the distance on foot. This way had brought him into the rear of the house, and he walked to one corner, seeking a side window. A hound began baying from within.

"Shut your mouth, you Fenri wolf," bellowed a man, and the structure fairly shook with his voice, and Hogarth knew he was at the right place. He stiffened against the unpainted weatherboarding as the front door was flung open. There was a moment of silence, a muffled shift from inside. Then Sigrod's voice again. "Better take a look around, Are."

Hogarth moved back around the corner, listening to the approaching footfalls. He waited till the figure appeared beyond the end of the building, then spoke in a quiet voice.

"I've got a gun on you, Are. Make a sound and it's your last."

The boy's silhouette grew taller with his stiffening. It was in this moment that the dog, which must have been heeling him, appeared at the corner. Hogarth had a vivid, kalaideoscopic impression of a purring, throaty snarl, all the more deadly for its vicious restraint, and a huge body in midair before him, yellowish eyes flashing dimly in the gloom, fangs bared and dripping saliva. His reaction was involuntary. He heard his gun go off with a muffled roar against the bony chest, and then the teeth were sinking into his arm with a biting agony that drew a shout from him.

He went onto his back beneath the leaping hound, trying to tear the bitten arm loose, fighting to block those clawing forepaws from ripping his eyes out.

"Thorstein," shouted Are, and Hogarth felt the animal jerk to a kick, and then a second, which tore the dog away from him. He started to roll over on one side and rise, and then caught the dull glint of light down the octagonal barrel of the Winchester Are held on him. He allowed himself to sink back. The youngest Trygvesson stopped to pick up the gun Hogarth had dropped.

"Are?" shouted Sigrod from the porch. "What happened? Are you all right."

"All right," Are told him. "I'm coming in."

the LINCOLN COUNTY CATTLE WAR

AT THE CLOSE OF THE CIVIL WAR, THE WEARY TEXANS WHO HAD FOUGHT BRAVELY FOR THE **CONFEDERACY** FOR FOUR LONG YEARS, RETURNED TO THEIR HOMES TO FIND THAT MANY CHANGES HAD TAKEN PLACE. RANCHES AND LIVESTOCK HAD BEEN SORELY NEGLECTED. GREAT NUMBERS OF CATTLE WERE RUNNING WILD AND UNBRANDED... IT WAS DIFFICULT TO PROVE OWNERSHIP. THERE WAS BUT ONE RECOURSE-- THE **STRONG** TOOK WHAT THEY WANTED, GATHERING IN THE BIGGEST HERDS... IT WAS A **SURVIVAL** OF THE **FITTEST**...ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL OF THESE EARLY CATTLE BARONS WAS **JOHN CHISUM**. HIS VAST HERDS GREW SO RAPIDLY HE BEGAN TO LOOK ABOUT FOR MORE GRAZING LAND. CONSEQUENTLY HE MOVED HIS HORDE OF CATTLE INTO THE PECOS RIVER COUNTRY, IN NEW MEXICO, AND ESTABLISHED A NUMBER OF RANCHES.....

RUTHLESSLY, **CHISUM** DROVE OFF OR ABSORBED THE LIVESTOCK OF THE NEIGHBORING RANCHERS... HIS FEUDAL-LIKE TACTICS DID NOT EXACTLY ENDEAR HIM TO THE ENRAGED CATTLEMEN... THOROUGHLY AROUSED, THEY BANDED TOGETHER AND CHOSE MAJ. L.G. MURPHY, A HARD-BITTEN ARMY OFFICER AND OWNER OF ONE OF THE BIGGEST RANCHES IN NEW MEXICO, AS THEIR LEADER. BOTH SIDES BECAME ARMED CAMPS. AND SO, IT WAS INEVITABLE THAT **BILLY** THE KID SHOULD DRIFT INTO THIS NO-MAN'S LAND... FOR IT WAS HERE HE WAS TO CARVE HIS NAME AS THE MOST INFAMOUS KILLER THE WEST HAS EVER KNOWN! VIOLENCE FLARED INTO THE OPEN EARLY IN 1879-- WITH THE KID SHOOTING DOWN THREE MEN IN COLD BLOOD!.. THE REIGN OF TERROR AND BLOODSHED CONTINUED WITH COMPLETE DEFIANCE OF THE LAW! PEACE WAS FINALLY RESTORED TO LINCOLN COUNTY ONLY AFTER BILLY THE KID WAS KILLED BY SHERIFF PAT GARRETT IN FORT SUMNER (1881). BEFORE IT WAS OVER MORE THAN **50** MEN HAD MET SAVAGE DEATHS!!

He toed the hound's body with one foot. The animal did not move. "It seems," he said, "we can't meet without you hurting one of us. Let's go inside."

HOGARTH rose heavily, gripping his bleeding arm, and stumbled down the wall of the house to the porch. Sigrod's prodigious silhouette filled the yellow doorway. He backed in when he saw Hogarth. His laugh held a terrible satisfaction.

"Well," he said, in a thick, mocking tone. "Come in, Hogarth. We *are* in luck today."

Hogarth had kept bachelor's quarters enough with Waco to expect a degree of untidiness, but the disruption of the Trygvesson living room harked back to the animal environment of their barbaric ancestors. The rotting buffalo hides covering the walls dripped hoary handfuls of hair over the brass-bound chest and pegged chairs beneath them. Sufficing for rugs were half a dozen matted bearskins with head and claws still on, and covering these and the bare puncheon floor between them, from front to rear, was such a collection of old bones and opened tin cans and other rubbish as must have taken years to collect.

There was a blazing fire in the high stone fireplace, and this was the only light in the room, casting its bizarre, flickering illumination across the blank, oblivion face of Rane, who sat on a grizzly pelt before the hearth, staring emptily into the flames. Sigrod saw Hogarth's eyes pass to the man.

"Surely, you know Rane," he said, in that clumsy mockery. "Rane, this is Hogarth, say hello to Hogarth, my son." Rane did not answer, and Sigrod wheeled back to Hogarth, his mouth working faintly with savage restraint. "Forgive Rane, Hogarth. He does not recognize anyone anymore. Even his own father. Isn't that too bad? Even his own father. Just sits there and stares and says nothing."

His eyes glittered with tears, and the grin fixed on his face was ghastly. Otherre had been sitting at the table, tuning the strings of some harp-like instrument, and had stood upon Hogarth's entrance. For the first moment his whole prodigious frame had been filled with threat, giving Hogarth the same sense that dog had given him in the instant before its leap. But as Otherre saw the attitude adopted by his father, a stiff, stony repression settled over his face, and watching Sigrod as if for the signal, he had reseated himself, and started tuning the instrument again.

"Sit down, Hogarth," said Otherre through clenched teeth, staring rigidly at the instrument. "We were just being entertained by the girl. She has been singing songs for us and recounting sagas of her people all atfernoon. She is as fine a skald as ever amused Haakon the Good."

Hogarth could see her now. She formed a pale, stiff figure at the end of the room, in her dress of dirty white buckskin. The pallor of her face was evident even beneath the smears of ochre on her cheeks. Her eyes, however, formed the focus of attraction, reflecting the fluttering firelight. She was staring at Hogarth, and he realized her gaze must have been on him since he had first entered. He met the gaze, and was filled wtih an exotic, giddy sense of something passing between them, a strange, clutching affinity so great that he lost sense of where he was. Her lips moved soundlessly, pronouncing his name.

Sigrod had been studying this with a certain perverted relish, and he emitted the guttural chuckle again. "Go on, Wastewin. You were telling us of the warriors." The girl continued to stare at Hogarth, and Sigrod's voice took on a hoarse, terrible vibration. "I said go on."

She drew in a choking breath, and began, like a child reciting a catechism. "Canyouny kicicipi is the ceremony in which a young man is sent out to get war honors. The Thunder Dreamer goes through camp singing war songs and the young men come to sit in a circle before the Wakan yan tipi, the Holy Tepee, their heads bowed over folded hands. One of the most worthy is chosen by two chiefs. The chosen boy strips to breech clout and moccasins and goes out to get war honors. If he returns successfully, the weakicipi is performed for him, the Victory Dance.

"Siger," shouted Sigrod, "victory. By Odin, that's amazing. Proof after proof of it all afternoon. These people are surely descended from the Vikings, Otherre.

"The American coast could well have been the Helluland discovered by Eric the Red's son, in ancient times," said Are, moving around from behind Hogarth. He was filled with that same, waiting repression, too. Otherre continued to pluck the harp, idly now. Hogarth felt his jaw muscles begin to ache, and realized he had been clenching his teeth.

"How else could it be?" said Sigrod, with a forced, false enthusiasm, stalking to the table and pouring liquor from a crockery jug into beakers of ancient, beaten silver. "Your Wakan Tanka is our Odin, Wastewin, the supreme God. Your Thunder Dreamer gets his power to bring rain or drive it away from the same god, Frey, who presides over rain and sunshine in our land. You even go into battle like we do. Did you ever hear of Berserker who was so filled with battle lust he stripped off all his armor and rushed to the fight naked, defeating the enemy single-handed? And on your return from war—Siger! The Victory Dance!" He turned to Hogarth with a beaker, face flushed, "drink with us, Hogarth. We have found a countryman in this strange land, a veritable Valkyrie sent from Valhalla to fill our horns with mead and feed us with flesh of the swine."

Hogarth accepted the beaker stiffly, his eyes crossing the words engraved on the tarnished silver. Vaer dig selv nok.

"And this is our Victory Dance, Hogarth," said Sigrod, his face flushing, the guttural restraint leaving his voice. "This is our ale-feast, upon returning from the coast of a foreign land with plunder and prisoners to sacrifice to Odin." He lifted the beaker and drained it in one gulp, turning to slam it down the table. Hogarth had the feeling of a swiftly approaching crescendo. He wondered how much longer he could contain the terrible tension within his body.

"We have our songs too," said Sigrod, thickly. "The same as your Song of the Sun and your Bear Dreamer chant. Rane used to be the skald in this hird. Now Otherre has to do it. Isn't that too bad, Hogarth? Rane can no longer sing and play as he used to. Rane can no longer do anything. Just sit there and stare. Sing us a song, skald, play your langeleik and

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Otherre plucked a few tentative notes on the langeleik. Sigrod moved unsteadily down the table. Hogarth's fists clenched.

"You thought you could put us off with your songs and your stories?" Sigrod told Wastewin, his head lowering. "You thought we had forgotten? You're through singing. It's our turn to entertain. We would know where those cattle have been taken, and by whom."

Wastewin's chin lifted. "I don't know."

SIGROD reached out a giant hand to clutch the front of her buckskin dress, jerking her up. "You do know. Where are they? Why is it we can never trail them past the Medicine Wheel?" He shook her. Wastewin's bare calf was jerked against the brass side of a stew pot which had been simmering on a hook within the hearth. She cried out in pain. Hogarth's whole body gathered itself involuntarily for the shift toward them. Otherre stopped plucking at the langeleik to pull his Colt from its holster and lay it on the table before him.

"Father," said Are, "she's only a girl . . ."

"She's only a longrider," shouted Sigrod, the restraint slipping from him swiftly in a mounting violence, and threw her brutally back against the wall, oblivious to that bare leg hissing against the pot now. "Where are they, Pretty Face," he roared, beating her against the wall, "where are the cattle and who rides with you?"

Perhaps Are's youth retained remnants of the chivalry the others had lost, for he stepped around Hogarth to jump across the room, catching his father by those immense, bunched shoulders. "Sigrod, Sigrod, you're drunk, you can't beat a girl like you would a dog, she's a woman, Sigrod, remember Gudrida—"

"Are you questioning my authority!" bellowed Sigrod, releasing Wastewin to whirl about and catch Are around behind the neck with one hand. The boy tried to tear free, but with a sweeping motion of his gigantic arm, Sigrod spun Are across the room to crash up against the wall. He slid down the undressed pine logs in a cloud of dust and hair shaken from the rotting buffalo robes, and remained there, staring at his father in a dazed, twisted way.

Rane remained completely oblivious to this, gazing emptily into the fire. Sigrod stood glaring at Are a moment, breathing heavily, his face turned the color of raw beef by the diffused blood in it. In turning back to Wastewin, his eyes crossed Hogarth in a momentary, covert way. Hogarth saw something sly in them. He realized, with a dull shock, what Sigrod's purpose was.

Otherre sat at the table, that wooden, waiting look on his face, battered fingers continuing to pluck idly at the langeleik. Sigrod had turned completely back to Wastewin. She stood spread-eagled against the wall, staring intently at something on the floor. Hogarth saw it, then. His Forehand lay on the grizzly pelt just behind Rane. Are had stuffed it into his belt, and it must have been torn out when Sigrod spun him across the room. Wastewin's eyes raised to Hogarth's. He allowed his head to dip down faintly.

"H'g un!" cried Wastewin, in a shrill, strident voice, and spun away from between Sigrod and the wall. He lurched forward to catch her, but she had already snatched a long, blazing brand from the fire. It struck Rane in the face as she wheeled back with it, and he reared up with a startled, animal scream. Otherre put down the langeleik and drove to his feet, reaching for his Colt. Hogarth was already lurching for his own weapon, and knew he would be a million years too late. Then the blazing brand flew from behind Sigrod, and like a flame-tipped arrow, struck Otherre full in the face. His roar of agony filled the room.

Hogarth was scooping up his gun, and spinning toward the man. Otherre had reeled back with the pain, but was now trying to recover himself, pawing blindly at his eyes with one hand and bending forward to try and line up his Colt. Hogarth's left palm made a fanning motion across the big hammer. The crash drowned all other sound for that instant. Otherre grunted sickly, and bent forward, still trying to bring his gun in line.

The shot caused Sigrod to release Wastewin and whirl toward Hogarth. Are was leaping from where he had been thrown against the wall. Ignoring them

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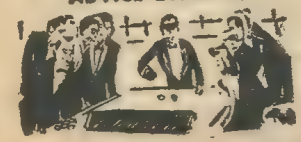

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both, Hogarth fanned his gun again. Otherre groaned and fell forward across the table, lying on his chest there as he stubbornly tried to lift his gun.

"I can see now, Hogarth," he shouted, in an agonized triumph, "I can see now."

Hogarth fanned out a third shot and saw Otherre's head jerk up to it, and Otherre's Colt go off toward the ceiling. Then there was a hissing sound, and darkness fell with a shocking abruptness. Both Sigrod and Are struck Hogarth at the same time.

He went down beneath them, realizing Wastewin must have upset the kettle of stew on the fire, for that hissing rose above Sigrod's harsh shout.

Hogarth rolled over in utter blackness, his gun coming against someone. The shot was muffled. The man's scream caused a shooting pain in Hogarth's eardrums, deafening him momentarily, but one of those bodies was dead weight on him now. He squirmed from beneath it, slashing blindly at the other man, rewarded by a cry of pain and a sudden release.

He gained his feet. Another body stumbled into his, and he whirled against it, bringing his gun around before he sensed in its softness, who it was.

"Wastewin?" he gasped.

"Are?" bellowed Sigrod in an anguished way, from the fireplace. "Are?"

Wastewin twisted Hogarth toward the door and they stumbled through. His boots made a hollow clatter across the stone porch and down the stairs, and it must have been heard from within. They were not halfway across the compound to timber when a vague, uncertain light flickered into being within the house, outlining the doorway.

"That brand you threw must have caught on those pelts," Hogarth gasped. "The whole place is on fire."

A silhouette appeared momentarily in the illuminated rectangle of the doorway. Hogarth turned to fire, but his gun clicked on an empty chamber. Cursing, he began jacking out the empties. The man in the door stumbled across the porch and down the steps, and then weaved in a strange, mechanical run toward the timber, not even looking at Hogarth and the girl.

"Vaer dig selv nok," he called in a hollow monotone, staring blankly at the trees as he stumbled toward them, "vaer dig selv nok . . ."

"Rane," muttered Hogarth, as the boy disappeared into the trees, still calling that idiotic refrain. As they too reached timber, another silhouette appeared in the growing light of the door, a silhouette turned grotesquely topheavy by the great weight centered in the shoulders.

"Hogarth?" It was Sigrod's voice, filled with the deafening thunder of these bergs. "Hogarth. You've killed my boys. They're dead, Hogarth, and you've killed them. I know you're out there. By Odin, I swear I'll hunt you till I find you, and by Frey I swear I'll make you suffer when I find you like no tortured soul in hell has ever suffered, and then, by Thor, I'll kill you, Hogarth, I'll kill you!"

XI

THE DAWN crept through the pine forest in a shy exploration to send its pale light through the chokecherry bushes where Hogarth and the girl had finally stopped and fallen into an exhausted sleep. Wastewin was first to awake, and her stirrings roused Hogarth. He lay there watching her crawl to the spring a few feet below the cherry brush.

"Wiwila," she murmured, kneeling there, "have pity on me as I drink."

There was something haunting in the primitive simplicity of it that touched him, somehow. "Why do you do that?" he asked drowsily.

She turned to him, smiling faintly. "Wiwila is the spirit of the spring. We pray to him for protection. You can see how unprotected a warrior would be when he bent over to drink." She rose. "There is a pool further down. I'm going to wash."

He watched the lithe facility of her movement out through the trees, trying to recognize the strange, poignant emotion she drew from him. It had to do with the indefinable nostalgia riding in on the pungent scent of pine needles, and the cheerful, naive chuckle of the little spring, and the first warmth of the sun driving the chill from his body. He stretched, luxuriating in a feeling he had not known for many weeks, hearing the dull splash of the girl farther down.

She came back in a few minutes, bare legs gleaming beneath the swish of her skirt, her black hair hanging in rich, dripping, untramelled abundance down her back, shining across the top of her head like a wet beaver pelt. He realized she must have taken a full bath. The ochre and smudges of dirt were gone from her face. A delicate purity there struck him. He had not expected to see it in an Indian.

"Down there in the pool I could not help thinking of Sigrod," she said.

"Do you feel that we ran away?"

She shook her head. "I know what it was, Hogarth. You said it was to get me away. But I know. You couldn't just stay there for the purpose of killing again."

He lowered his gaze, staring at the ground. "The whole thing was twisted, somehow, from the start. I had no basic cause for quarrel with them. Under any other circumstances we could—" he broke off, making that gesture with his hand again, as if seeking the words—"what I mean is, their strength, their courage, their individuality . . ."

"You could have admired," she finished for him. "You are beginning to see, then."

His face raised again. "See what?"

She knelt beside him, putting her hands on the grass. "What is it you sought here, Hogarth? I knew more of what was going on down there in the Basin than you think. I could see the way you came in with nothing but a few cattle and your wits and your strength, and began to gain control. You have gained control now, haven't you? Everyone just where you want them, owning more land, more cattle, more financial resources, than any of the others down there. One more step and you'll be in the big saddle. And then what will you have?"

It came from him automatically. "Something I've worked toward all my life."

"What?" she said. "A big rich house you don't spend any time in. A wife as grasping and ruthless as yourself, who won't be satisfied till she owns the whole county, the whole state. A crew so big you don't even know them personally. A complete lack of friends, the old ones leaving you, or dying because of your greed, like Waco. Surrounded by fawning fork-tongued weaklings like Karnes because you've

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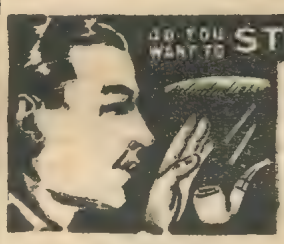
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had to kill off all the strong square ones like Tremaine or the Trygvessons, who wouldn't knuckle under."

"Wastewin—"

"And when you do reach that position what will you possess?" She swept one arm out to point through the trees. "Look down there. I own as much land as you do. I can ride on it or drink its water or gather siptola from the arrow-leaf. The sunshine is mine, the sky, the trees, the earth."

"You speak as an Indian," he said. "A white man needs more."

"Why?" she asked. "Have you ever had any more, before this, all your life?"

A rueful smile touched his lips, and he shook his head slowly, staring at her in wonderment. "No."

"Are you as happy now as when you rode with Waco and the whole world was your pasture?"

Memories surged through him in a swiftly growing tide. Finally he shook his head again. She stared intensely at his face, then rose with that supple ease.

"Do you still think I'm mixed up with that rustling?" she asked.

The other still held his mind, and he answered absently. "You must know something about it."

"I know where the cattle are held," she muttered. He looked up in surprise, and she shrugged uncomfortably, turning away. "You saved my life, really. I owe you that."

He rose, and the stiffness of his joints drew a faint expression of pain over his face. "Where are they?"

"Do you know Hole-in-the-Wall?" she asked.

"I've heard so many stores about that place I don't know whether they're windies or not," he said.

"There is such a place," she said. "Its eastern side is blocked off by a jutting fault made by some upheaval of the earth. This is called the Red Wall, and runs north and south along the Red River for many miles, with only one entrance through it, which could be held by a few well armed men. That's why the country beyond is called the Hole-in-the-Wall. The Big Horns form its western boundary, but no white man knew how to get through them into the Hole-in-the-Wall country. It isn't so much the mountains which have kept them out as the danger of entering a section so full of outlaws ready to shoot strangers on sight. But Dull Knife led the Cheyennes into Hole-in-the-Wall after the Custer battle and found a western entrance out of the country. My people learned of this entrance from the Cheyenne. Now a white has found it. The entrance is too small for a large herd of cattle to be driven through, even narrower than Paintrock Gap. That fitted in with their plans, anyway. A dozen head of cattle at a time, driven by one man, would be almost impossible to follow from Medicine Wheel to the entrance of Hole-in-the-Wall."

"What man?" he said, catching her arm. "You know."

"I know his name," she said. "When he takes the cattle, he rides an unshod horse to make it appear the Indians are doing it. Otherwise he rides a black animal, with white stockings."

"Geddes," said Hogarth, and then, because he found it hard to accept, his head raised slightly, and his voice was hollow. "George Chapel?"

PTE TA TIYOPA, she called it, Gate of the Buffalo, and it led eastward through the ridges just behind Medicine Peak, a gorge so narrow in some spots a horse would have had trouble forcing its way through. It was choked with brush bearing recent trampling, and after what Hogarth estimated as four or five miles of walking, they reached the eastern entrance opening out onto grassy slopes that swept down into a broad valley. After a short search they found a bunch of heifers grazing the bottoms of a stream about a mile from the gorge. The animals still bore the under-bit earmark and Big Bit brand of Jack Tremaine's outfit.

"The Red Wall lies east on across these valleys farther than you can see," she said. "These cattle could be left in here for years without a human being to watch them."

"We'll go back for horses and help," he said. "This will make a roundup the likes of which Meeteetse has yet to see."

It took them the better part of the afternoon to backtrack through the Gate of the Buffalo. Between its brush-choked, hidden western outlet and Medicine Peak, the

land was shale and talus slopes, precluding any tracks, making it all too evident why no one had been able to trail the cattle to the Gate. Thus, by late afternoon, they had reached Medicine Wheel. And it was the girl, as they crossed a last ridge overlooking the Wheel, who found the sign. She halted abruptly, peering down. Caught by her attitude, Hogarth bent over.

"Looks like one of those Oregon puddin' foots all right," said Hogarth. "No other horse wears a shoe that size. Nice and fresh, too."

"He said he'd follow you," she whispered in a small, breathless way. At first he thought it was the tracks engendering that chill foreboding in her voice. Then he saw her eyes were not on the ground. They were looking past him into the timber below them. He wheeled to see the movement down there, reached out an arm blindly to catch her elbow.

"We're skylighted," he muttered, yanking her off the ridge and down toward the trees. They reached stunted spruce and halted, breathing heavily. That taut, brutal look had hardened the planes of his face, pulled one corner of his thin lips down. He realized she was watching him, and turned toward her.

"There were some of our warriors who gloried in the stalk, and others who could not stand to play a waiting game," she said. "I always admired the second kind, somehow. It will have to come sooner or later anyway. Why don't you go and meet him?" He started to move his hand toward her, and she must have divined what was was on his mind. She drew herself up. "Don't worry about me. I've taken care of myself so far, haven't I? You'll have to forget about me when it does come, anyway. You want it this way, now, Hogarth. You're that kind. Take it."

He stared into her face, surprised that the question should come to him here. Could Kerry, he asked himself, do it like this, when the chips were really down? Then that faint, sardonic smile twitched at his lips. He grasped her shoulder.

"Don't move from here till I get back."

He whirled and went down through the spruce in a swift, shadowy movement, not so fast that he had no control over the sound he made. He avoided the brush,

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flitting from tree to tree, slowing down as he neared the edge of timber, with the gigantic slabs of the Medicine Wheel ahead. He knew a last nebulous regret that it should come to this, with Sigrod, and stifled that. Sound began drifting up to him, unrecognizable at first, tantalizingly unrecognizable. He halted, a dark portent in his face, striving to place it. Then he could. Cattle. And as recognizance came, the vague movement which had first caught their attention from the ridge resolved itself into the dim, shadowy emergence of animals from the fringe of timber on the other side of the clearing in which lay Medicine Wheel. It was not Sigrod, then. It was a string of steers, driven by a man on an unshod paint.

With all the cattle in the clearing, the rider halted them, turning his horse. "You leaving me here?"

Another rider appeared at the fringe of trees. "Yes. Be careful from here on in. Hogarth was coming up this way yesterday.

Hogarth had recognized that other horse —bearing the unmistakable height and refinement he had come to know so well, and still unwilling to believe it, he stared blankly at the second rider, still a shadowy form in the further trees.

"Kay," he murmured, shaking his head from side to side in that disbelief, "Kay . . ."

The man within the clearing dismounted, easing the girth on his paint to give it a rest. He bent to examine its feet. Then he straightened, slowly, as Hogarth stepped into the open.

"Chapel?" he said.

"No, Geddes," said Hogarth, still walking toward the man, his hands out at his sides.

"Hogarth," said Geddes, in hollow surprise.

There was a dim violence of movement within the yonder timber after he said it. Then a moment in which Kay must have been trying to decide whether Hogarth had overheard her voice, and recognized it. Finally more movement, as she must have realized he could not help it. Her bay resolved itself from the shadowy trees. She walked it up the line of lowing, restless cattle, and halted the animal behind Geddes. Hogarth had stopped too, now.

"You," he asked the woman, "from the first?"

"Yes, Bob." Kay's voice held a resignation. "Do you find it hard to accept?"

HE DID not answer for a moment, surprised, somehow, that he did not find it hard. All the little things began to come back, things he should have recognized at the time, had he not been so blinded by his vanity, so sure of his powers—her all too swift acceptance of his love that night in the buggy, her quick acquiescence to his plan for getting Chapel to sign that check, her later calculations, as hard and calculating and selfish as his own, fitting so easily into his cold, expedient code. Again, as that time on the porch just before Waco's death, he had the disturbing sense of seeing himself, unveiled.

"Chapel is in on it?" he asked, finally.

Her laugh held faint disgust. "He has no idea. My ambitions were surprisingly like yours, Hogarth, when I joined the co-operative five years ago. Only I didn't make them known so clearly, or try to effect them so fast. George Chapel is such a conservative, it took me a long time to get him in the position where I could use his love for me to advantage. While I was doing that, I had already started cutting out these cattle, even a bunch now and then from my own Big Dipper to divert suspicion. The way the herds were handled, no one operator profited enough to make him wealthy. We all would stay no more than tinhorn operators with tinhorn spreads in a tin-horn association. But if one operator could have gotten the total profit from one of those herds, you can see how it would set him up. The co-op's stamp is well-known and respected. I planned to negotiate a contract with an Eastern packer we had never dealt with before, and sell the herd under the co-op road brand. As a known representative of the association, I could have received the check personally. All it would need was Chapel's signature to cash it. I think my influence over him would have been enough."

Hogarth spoke through his teeth. "And then I came along."

Again that brittle laugh. "Yes. With your ambition, and your capacity. It was

something I hadn't planned on, but I saw the possibilities, if I could step on your wagon."

"Then you never were—" he moved his head from side to side, unwilling, somehow, to say it so bluntly.

"In love with you?" she supplied. "No more than you were in love with me, Hogarth. Perhaps you deluded yourself into believing it, those first weeks, but underneath that, your basic motive was to use me. Does it mar your vanity to find out you aren't the only one who can play that game?"

"Then Geddes wasn't working for Chapel that night I found him there?" said Hogarth.

"Chapel thought Geddes had been working for him," she said. "But Geddes has been my man from the first time he trailed a dozen Big Bit steers up here three years ago on one of my bare-foot bays to make it look like an Indian's work."

Mention of the brand brought it to Hogarth's mind. "When I was waiting in the Bullhorn that day for Chapel to show up at Karnes' Tremaine started to tell me something he had found out on this rustling. Was that why you had to kill him?"

"He was close to the truth," said Kerry.

Hogarth drew a thin breath. "Why Waco?"

Geddes was pulling the glove off his right hand. Hogarth's eyes were on him. The woman shifted restlessly in the saddle, her head turned toward Hogarth.

"He was too close to you," she said. "He formed the wedge between us that threatened my plans." Her indrawn breath held the same weary resignation as her voice. She waved a hand at the cattle. "I suppose it would be out of the question to ask that you accept . . . this."

"After Waco?" he said acridly.

She shrugged. "I suppose not."

"A fanner," said Geddes, and that mocking smile was in his voice. "A fanner."

"You wanted to see, sometime," said Hogarth. "Take a look."

"I am," said Geddes, and the impetus of his first violent movement put a grunt into his voice. With his attention on the man, and all his unconscious reaction occupied with drawing his own weapon, Hogarth was only dimly aware of the

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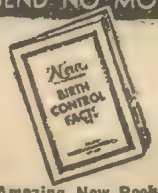

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crashing sound to his right, and of Kerry whirling in her saddle and yanking at the Winchester booted beneath her knee.

"Sigrod," she cried, and the crash of guns drowned her voice.

The gun in Hogarth's hand was only one of the exploding weapons, and it was not until a second after the gun bucked up beneath his fanning palm that he knew he had hit Geddes. The man coughed, took a staggering step forward, tried to raise the gun he had freed, then dropped it, and fell on his face.

Hogarth was already whirling to his left. The gunshots had startled the cattle into a running bawling mill, raising a pall of dust that obscured Kerry, but the rider charging from the trees was plain enough. Sigrod drove his great white stallion in a wild run at them, firing into the dust where Kerry's bay had been.

"Sigur, Hogarth," he bellowed, turning his flaming gun toward Hogarth, "Sigur," and rode down on him with a twisted, raging face.

Hogarth fanned his gun the second time and saw the stallion jerk and stagger with the slug, and raised the gun and fanned it a third and fourth, and saw Sigrod reel backward in the saddle. Then he had to jump aside from the thundering, stumbling white beast. Sigrod's gun loomed in his vision, and he ducked aside, realizing the man had thrown it, and tried to shift on over in a violent jump to avoid Sigrod as he came after the weapon. But the man's gigantic body struck Hogarth, wild Viking screams deafening him, and he went to the ground.

Sigrod's great weight crushed Hogarth's breath from him. Gasping with the pain of it, gun torn from his hands by the violent fall, he fought to roll from beneath the grizzled giant. He gained his feet, but Sigrod followed him up, bleeding from the chest where one of Hogarth's bullets had caught him, roaring his vengeance to Odin and Snorre. Hogarth knew the mistake of trying to stand up to the man, and allowed the savagery of Sigrod's attack to drive him backward, grunting spasmodically as one of the man's great fists almost knocked him from his feet.

He had not reckoned with the limestone slabs, however, and found himself halted, suddenly, with the feel of rough stone at his back. Before he could wheel away, Sigrod had pinned him there, and was mauling him. Hogarth put his head down, driving his blows with all his vicious strength into Sigrod's midsection.

But he could feel the lithic contraction of stomach muscles in the man's belly, inches thick, so hard they hurt his hands with each blow, and realized wtih a sickening sense of futility how little effect it was having on Sigrod. The Norseman merely expelled a little air to each blow, and continued to bellow like a maddened bull, bleeding all over Hogarth as he drove him back against the limestone.

BLINDED, gasping beneath the deadly ferocity of the attack, Hogarth reeled to one side from a blow. Sigrod's knee came into his groin, and he fell backward into darkness. Spun around that way, trying to keep his feet, with the other man following him on back, Hogarth went into the limestone again. He realized dimly that he must have reeled into one of those medicine tipis at the end of a spoke in the wheel. Then his face was driven harder against the stone as Sigrod crashed in behind him. He screamed with the agony of a crushed nose and flesh ground against battered cheekbone. The sound held a hollow, muted tone. He tried to twist away once more, kicking, butting, striking in a blind orgasm of agonized reaction. He managed to whirl from between Sigrod and the wall, only to come up against the side wall. The building shuddered faintly to his violent fall against the limestone, and he heard the faint crunch of rock against rock. Sigrod's crushing, suffocating, roaring weight was thrown into him again. A blow knocked his head back. Bleeding face turned up for that instant, he saw what that crunching sound had been.

The structure was formed of limestone blocks for walls, supporting slabs which made up the roof. One of these heavy slabs had slipped and was held up precariously by only a crumbling tip. At each spasmodic jar of Hogarth's body against the side wall, that slab of the roof quivered perceptibly.

Hogarth still tried to block Sigrod's savage attack, but he was battered and dizzy, and his swift, vicious expedience

was useless in that confined space. One of Sigrod's blows knocked his head back against the stone again. Sigrod's boot caught him in the groin. Groaning sickly, he saw the slab quiver above him again. It was just a matter of time. Then he realized it was his only chance. He could not last much longer, and when his resistance ceased, Sigrod would kill him, and it was his only chance.

He lashed a blow into Sigrod's face. The giant grunted, knocked back enough so that Hogarth could push himself away from the wall. Then Sigrod recovered and carried him back up against it with a terrible driving lunge at his stomach. Retching with it, Hogarth heard the crunch of stone on stone again.

He bent over, shouting in hoarse agony with the pain of the blows about his head he had to take in that position, and butted Sigrod away once more. The man came back with one knee rising that caught Hogarth in the face, straightening him and knocking him back against the wall. Through the giddy vortex of blind agony, he heard the crunching sound again. He put his hands flat against the wall, managed to get a bent leg between himself and Sigrod, kicking out.

It pushed the giant outwards spasmodically. Hogarth was too weak to follow. He sagged against the wall, waiting for Sigrod to come back in, hoping it would be this time, knowing he could not last much longer.

"Sigur," roared the Viking, and his body crashing against Hogarth did it. Hogarth felt the wall shake with the force. Head turned upward, he heard the crunching stone, saw the slab of the roof quiver, start to slide off. With what was almost a groan of thanks, he allowed his feet to slide from beneath him, catching Sigrod's arm. The man went down over him willingly, still slugging at his head. Then Sigrod's bestial screams turned to a shout of agony as the stone slab struck him. His body was borne on top of Hogarth in a rush of resilient, crushing, irresistible weight. It was like sinking into a bog, for Hogarth. He had a sense of that infinite weight atop him, pushing him down. There was a palpable, physical suction to the unconsciousness, pulling at him like

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viscid, gluey mud. He went under in a quick, spinning motion.

FROM somewhere far above Hogarth came the feeling of hands. They were on his face, first, cool and exploring. It seemed someone was sobbing. Then tugging at his arms, his shoulders. Consciousness returned in painful reluctance, pulling him out of that black bog with the same sucking sensation. He opened his eyes to see Sigrod lying across him, the limestone slab pinning them both to the earth. It had struck the Norseman's head, crushing it in, and blood matted his pale mane of grizzled hair.

"Hogarth," gasped Wastewin, tugging at him, "Hogarth . . ."

"I thought I told you to stay up here," he mumbled irrelevantly.

"I couldn't, I couldn't," she sobbed. "Are you hurt?"

He started squirming from beneath Sigrod, with her help. "Not by that stone. He broke its effect. It was the only way I could do it. He had about finished me."

Finally he got from beneath the dead man, and Wastewin helped him from the stone hut into the open. He leaned weakly against the wall, gingerly touching the purpling bruises on his face, dabbing futilely at sticky, caking blood. There were still a few cattle left in the clearing, tranquilly browsing at the sparse buffalo grass. Geddes' barefoot Paint stood a few feet away from the man's sprawled body. Then Hogarth saw another form, farther on. He drew a swift, shuddering breath, almost fell as he tried to break into a run. Wastewin caught him, and together they reached Kerry where she lay face down on the ground, Winchester beneath her with its finger lever jerked down. Hogarth hunkered over her, turned her face up. She was dead.

"Sigrod was shooting at her when he first showed," muttered Hogarth. He squatted there in silence for a space, staring at her face. The dirt and grime seemed to accentuate the edged hardness he had once taken for refinement. He wondered if he would look like that, in death. Or now. His head lifted toward the Indian girl.

**LES SAVAGE, JR.
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"Funny," he said. "Funny . . . to see the things you once thought meant so much, in their true light. Maybe it takes something as violent as this, to make you see them that way. I wonder if a man could change, after a lifetime of the things which formed him that way."

"You wouldn't have to change," she said. "There is nothing wrong with the qualities in you which gave you the capacity for this. Nothing wrong with strength or ambition or expedience. Only in how you used them. Used toward different ends, they can be very admirable. It is not you who has to change, only your ideas. And I think they have already begun."

He rose, looking into her face. The delicate purity there struck him again, so different from Kay's beauty, so much softer, promising. He took one of her hands.

"I'll still need help. Waco was a lot like you, the way he used to talk to me. I sort of feel lost without him. I used to think I was self-sufficient. But I need someone, Wastewin . . ."

Her hand tightened in his, and her eyes were shining, and her voice was so low and husky he could barely hear it. "I'll help you Hogarth, as long as you want."

"That will be a long time," he said. "Just about as long as I live, I guess."

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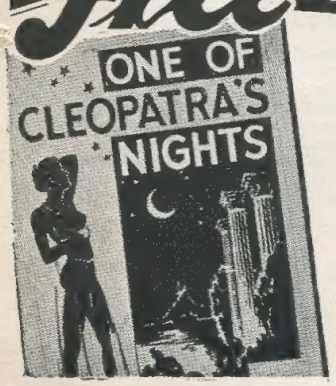

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